

Not Just Victims: Women in Terrorism from the Western Balkans

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Introduction

A growing body of research sheds light on the complicated relationship between women and violent extremist organizations, as women in terrorism range from victims and forced participants to supporters, facilitators, and perpetrators. These roles are evident in the latest trends of women joining terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS), among other violent extremist movements worldwide. In order to add to the discussion, this paper focuses on the contribution of women from Western Balkan countries and highlights consequences deriving from their involvement in terrorist organizations. The data show that Kosovo is not immune to the ongoing phenomena of violent extremism, and a thorough examination of the experience of women from this region helps explain the nuances of why they participate in conflict, and what roles they assume in violent extremist groups like IS. In addition to discussing women who travel to IS-controlled territory, a significant part of this paper addresses the broader trend of women from Western Balkan countries who support homegrown terrorism. The second aspect of the paper analyzes the response of Western Balkan countries, such as Kosovo and Bosnia & Herzegovina, to women participating in terrorist groups and highlights the demand for rehabilitation and reintegration programs. In sum, it is important to understand these dynamics in the region to help relevant stakeholders do more to prevent and counter women's involvement in terrorism and violent extremism.

Western Balkans: Context of women's participation in terrorist organizations

Broadly speaking, trends in the radicalization and recruitment of women by terrorist organizations in Balkan countries sometimes differ from their European counterparts in countries such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom.¹ At least in part, this difference is likely related to the experience of women in the Balkan region, who face greater challenges concerning domestic violence, discrimination in employment and property ownership, and financial instability, among other issues.² These matters are especially common in extremism-related cases from Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where conservative and patriarchal societies deny women empowerment.

Initially, policy discussions concerning people's participation in foreign conflicts treated the topics as an issue that affected men, not women. At least in the beginning, this perspective was offered

despite a lack of research on the driving factors of women's involvement in terrorist organizations from Balkan countries. To date, the involvement of women in modern terrorist organizations like IS is often overlooked, while male violence is cast as the status quo in research and views of the wider society.³ Some commentators dismiss men's participation in violent extremist groups with the explanation that 'boys will be boys,'⁴ suggesting that there is no need to ask 'why?' when men become violent. These assumptions are often based on gender stereotypes rather than evidence,⁵ defaulting to qualities that are conventionally ascribed to males and females for biological reasons.

In patriarchal societies such as Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania, husbands serve as authoritative figures within the family, offering some insight to radicalization and recruitment dynamics. In Western Balkan countries, women tend to think that due to the man's assumed power, they must obey their husbands and follow their orders. An Imam in Kosovo articulated this dynamic, suggesting that the mentality of Albanians assumes that "women are behind men or they need to follow their husbands." As such, these women might be influenced to follow their husband's desires to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq.⁶ In this context, it is also important to examine the role of domestic violence in countries like Kosovo. While striking, research suggests that citizens of Kosovo are relatively tolerant of physical violence.⁷ Statistics from a survey by the Kosovo Agency of Statistics and UNICEF show that about 33 percent of female respondents (age 15-49) from Kosovo stated that beatings from their husbands were justified in instances when she neglects the children, challenges her partner, refuses to have sex, or burns the food.⁸ This problem is related to the masculine culture and education in which men and women developed their ideas. Boys are taught by their mothers and family that they should be authoritative, stay prepared for war, hide their emotions, and act strong and protective.⁹ Age adds another layer to these dynamics as younger generations in Kosovo grow up in a society that recognizes contributions of men in discussions of war and ignores the efforts of women.¹⁰

To further contextualize these trends, it is useful to review rates concerning the number of men, women, and children who joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq and highlight the same figures for other countries in the Western Balkans. According to a report by the British Council, between 2012 and 2018, approximately 400 citizens of Kosovo participated in Middle Eastern conflicts as foreign fighters and migrants.¹¹ The majority of those that remain in conflict zones are defined as "non-combatants," meaning they do not directly engage in fighting; figures show that a total number of 139 non-combatants, consisting of 47 women and 92 children.¹² Moreover, estimates suggest an additional 66 men, who potentially served in combat roles, remain in conflict zones.¹³ Furthermore, figures from the police state that 127 citizens returned to Kosovo from Syria and Iraq, including 117 men, seven women, and three children.¹⁴ Data from law enforcement and intelligence in the region indicates that up to 1,075 individuals (women, children, and the elderly) traveled to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016.¹⁵ In the table below, there is data presented from the latest report of the British Council's Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum (ERF).

Western Balkans	Men in Syria and Iraq	Women in Syria and Iraq	Children in Syria and Iraq	Total
Albania	96	13	31	140
Bosnia and Herzegovina	177	63	57	297
Kosovo	255	48	95	398
Macedonia	140	14	No data	154
Montenegro	18	5	4	27
Serbia	37	12	10	59

*Table 1. Men/Women and Children who joined the conflict to Syria and Iraq from Western Balkans Countries*¹⁶

Drivers and Profiles of Women joining in Syria and Iraq

A range of internal and external drivers influence the women who join terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq from Western Balkan countries. Research shows that there is no “single profile” of women who join the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.¹⁷ The roles, motivations, and experiences of women are not monolithic, but diverse and shaped by context, community, and history.¹⁸ While some women are compelled or threatened to join the conflict by their husbands or other male family members, other women join IS on a voluntary basis and have unique drivers and motives for participation.¹⁹ Among other precipitants, push and pull factors in this region are often related to socio-economic conditions, ideological views, family relations, identity crises, and trauma.²⁰ Despite being portrayed as passive agents, women in IS also serve in a range of contributing roles. Even as care providers, women promote violent extremist ideologies and enable others to join the movement.²¹

As articulated earlier, many of the women from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia traveled to conflict zones with their husbands and families in order to perform traditional family-oriented roles and duties.²² Following the broader trend of family departures, women from Bosnia and Herzegovina started traveling to Syria in 2013.²³ Similar to mobilization trends in other parts of the world and the region, women from Kosovo traveled to Iraq and Syria with their families at increased rates in 2015, after the official declaration of the self-proclaimed Caliphate.²⁴ Whether forced to migrate or willing participants, women from the Western Balkans living in Iraq and Syria generally serve in supportive roles. Based on a report by the Atlantic Initiative and interviews with Kosovar women who returned from Syria, Bosnian and Kosovar women are generally limited to domestic life, and do not actively engage in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.²⁵ Furthermore, evidence suggests that most of the women from Kosovo stayed in groups mainly with other women from Albania and some ethnic Albanians from Macedonia due to language similarities. Some of the latest research also suggests that some of the women participants from Albania and Kosovo married foreign fighters from Macedonia, Kosovo, or Albania after their first husband died on the battlefield.²⁶

Although women from the Balkans who travel to IS-held territory face grim conditions in Syria and Iraq, it is important to note that some women returning from the conflict still express positive feelings about their experience. As an example, one woman described her involvement in IS as “great opportunity” compared to the lives they lead in their country of origin.²⁷ Even after leaving IS-controlled territory, some women remain committed to the cause; Kosovo alone has instances where well-educated women continued to support IS after they return to their native country.²⁸

Emerging Threats and Ongoing Challenges: Women as Domestic Plotters, Online Supporters, and Returnees

Next, it is important to discuss the latest threats and risks posed by women from the Balkan region who join terrorist organizations. Beyond the issue of women traveling to join IS, some recent cases show that female sympathizers from the region are willing to support or engage in violent extremism from their home countries. Additionally, Balkan countries face major challenges when it comes to addressing the women who return from Syria and Iraq. These instances show that there is an urgent need to address the problem through public policy and adopt approaches that recognize the complicated relationship between women and violent extremist groups.

As one aspect of these evolving threats, some women in Balkan countries appear eager to conduct domestic attacks. Four years after being prevented by authorities in Kosovo from joining IS, a Kosovar with Belgian citizenship named Gramos Shabani was arrested with his girlfriend Edona Haliti for planning a suicide attack on a military KFOR mission in Kosovo.²⁹ According to the court proceedings, in June 2018 Gramos and Edona planned to commit the terrorist attack together but were stopped when Kosovo Police arrested the couple after being under surveillance. Media reports suggested that her boyfriend recruited her to plan an attack, but there is not sufficient evidence to support this claim. Ultimately, this case demonstrates that the risk women pose should be considered as seriously as that of men. Additionally, transcripts from a prosecutor in Kosovo who works on terrorism-related indictments show that some of the wives of foreign fighters motivate their husbands in the conflict zones by portraying them as heroes and actively supporting their “jihad” in Syria.³⁰ In text messages, women express their desire to join the group, remind their husbands that their only purpose is jihad, and encourage them not to focus on material earnings like money.³¹

Some of the latest research from Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) shows instances where citizens of Kosovo living abroad also become part of terrorist organizations.³² One example of this phenomenon is the arrest of a minor from Kosovo who was living in Vienna, Austria. According to prosecutors, she was in contact with IS operatives for the preparation of a terrorist attack with poison.³³ She was reportedly introduced on social networks to a man called “Davud” and used “chat applications” to connect with other IS supporters to discuss plans to carry out a terrorist attack in Vienna.³⁴ According to news reports, she was particularly interested in poison attacks in places where food products were sold, and was given information on how to use chemicals such as “Agent Orange.”³⁵ A range of cases from different parts of Europe and North America also suggest that roles for women in terrorist groups like IS are expanding beyond the traditional family-based roles, especially outside of IS-controlled territory, as authorities have identified some attack plots involving women.³⁶

Another aspect of the threat involving women in terrorism pertains to their online behavior, a trend that is studied using KCSS’s database of extremist social networks on platforms like Facebook,

Telegram, and YouTube. Anecdotally, it appears Balkan countries have started to propagate more for the role of women in the so-called Islamic State. Moreover, individual profiles and pages such as “Caliphate/Hilafet Sisters” or “The protections of Ummah” have been re-activated.³⁷ On Facebook, one group advertises a Telegram channel that offers operational security instructions like avoiding using their real names or identification when they register for an Apple ID or Android application. More explicitly, the post states: “Our beloved sisters please share and follow this channel (in Telegram). The Kuffar don’t want us to be safe but we have a duty to protect our Ummah and our Islamic State. These apps downloaded from this channel ensure that you don’t provide your personal information to apple or android, keeping you more safe.”³⁸ Although this type of online activity poses a less immediate threat to society than women who join terrorist organizations or conduct plots, counter-extremism policymakers and practitioners should not overlook or underestimate virtual contributions. Both online and offline, women from the Balkan region continue to make meaningful additions to terrorist organizations without perpetrating violence.

Moreover, the reintegration and rehabilitation of women from the conflict in Syria and Iraq continue to be a point of tension for political debates in Balkan countries. Governments and local communities struggle to address issues related to people that return from conflict zones, and women returnees sometimes complicate the process, particularly when their children are involved. In many Balkan countries, returning women face prejudice from their families and stigmatization from their communities. These issues are, at least in part, made worse by conflict reporting that discusses instances where women married, remarried, or had children with men from non-Albanian nationalities. Patriarchal societies such as Kosovo fail to institute reintegration and rehabilitation programs for these women and the communities lack the understanding needed to address these phenomena without judging their “moral aspect.” Recent statistics from Western Balkan countries indicate that 319 citizens have returned to their countries.³⁹ While data show that the majority of returnees are men, evidence suggests that some women and children remain in Iraq and Syria; researchers explain that women “play a significant role in carrying forward the ideology and legacy of IS after the physical fall of ‘Caliphate.’”⁴⁰

A recent report by the International Center for the Study and Radicalization (ICSR) stated that around 41,490 international citizens from 80 countries became affiliated with IS in Iraq and Syria.⁴¹ Figures presented in the report suggest that up to 4,761 (13%) of these individuals were recorded as women, while approximately 4,640 (12%) of the people were thought to be minors.⁴² As a result of this mobilization, an enduring challenge for governments today is deciding how to effectively cope with the men, women, and minors who traveled in order to join the conflict. Data suggest that 7,366 persons have now returned to their home countries (20%), or appear to be in process of repatriation.⁴³ Out of this figure, however, only 256 (4%) of total returnees are women; this means that a mere 5% of the women who traveled to Syria and Iraq have returned from the conflict zone.⁴⁴ Of the women that do make it back to their country of origin, few appear to receive support from the government in the form of reintegration and re-socialization programs. One report that assesses threats posed by returning foreign fighters in the Western Balkans notes, “There are few if any rehabilitation and reintegration programs meeting the needs of both returnees and their families.”⁴⁵ The assessment goes on, adding, “Notably lacking are programs for non-combatant returnees,” which the report classifies as women and children, “who made up one-third of the Western Balkans’ contingent in Syria and Iraq.”⁴⁶

In the context of Kosovo, there is a lack of awareness among policymakers and the general community on how to handle the problem, and women and children are generally lumped together as non-combatants. For example, in a recent interview, the Kosovo Prime Minister spoke very vaguely about female returnees in Syria and Iraq saying that the problem is “[IS] women have children with non-Kosovars,” and that “sometimes we do not know who these women had babies with” or “they could be children of IS commanders.”⁴⁷ Unfortunately, such statements do not help the problem of prejudice against returnees, nor parse out the unique needs of women returnees compared to their children. When it comes to the reintegration of these demographics, nuanced responses are necessary regardless of the stigma attached to getting married and giving birth in conflict zones.

In a translated interview, the brother of “Nesa,” a woman who left Kosovo to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq, discussed his fears about the consequences facing his sister after she moved to the region.⁴⁸ At the time of the interview, Nesa was believed to be living in a Kurdish-run camp for internally displaced persons called Ajnisa (also known as Ayn Issa). According to Nesa’s brother, prior to her departure for Syria, “she was wise, sometimes sensitive as [a] character and not very sociable.”⁴⁹ Apparently the man she married only showed signs of increased religiosity after marriage. At the age of 18 and pregnant with her first child, Nesa and her husband left Kosovo for Syria. Nesa’s brother explained the events, describing that, “the last time [he] met her she was very sad and crying constantly but [they] as family of her were not informed where she [was] going.”⁵⁰ Next, Nesa’s husband died two weeks before their baby was born, and she was left alone under jihadist-controlled territory.⁵¹

After the death of her husband, Nesa attempted to return to Kosovo, but it was impossible; according to her brother, Nesa was only allowed to communicate with her family at times when they (the men she was with) let her use the phone and the internet.⁵² After a few months, she married a man from a country neighboring Kosovo, with whom she had another child. When she, her husband, and two other families from Kosovo finally attempted to leave Syria, they were caught by the Kurdish forces.⁵³ Her brother explained, “For two years we did not have any information about our sister [and] we thought she died together with her children. After two years, my phone was ringing, and it was Nesa on the phone telling me that she ended up on Kurdish Camp.”⁵⁴ Nesa’s brother noted that, “she was very worried, bored and hopeless about her fate.” According to his conversations with her, the conditions in the camp are terrible, there is not enough food, and life is very difficult.⁵⁵ Nesa also told her brother that “all women were separated from their husbands.”⁵⁶ While the ultimate fate of Nesa remains unknown, her brother expects her to survive and return home; he plans to support her despite the stigma.⁵⁷

While Nesa’s case provides some hope, as her brother offers his unwavering support, contemporary responses to female returnees in Kosovo and the Balkan region are broadly insufficient. As one priority, women, like men, need programming that is tailored to their unique needs and experiences. Children deserve similar resources and might benefit from initiatives that involve their parents and family. Ideally, programs for these demographics would include professional social and mental health workers capable of identifying and treating the trauma that arises from living in conflict zones. Practitioners could also account for the challenges that might emerge in the process of reintegration. For example, although rates of sexual violence against women from the Balkans in Syrian and Iraq are difficult to find, media reports about life in the so-called Islamic State regularly highlight the prevalence of rape and torture.⁵⁸ Women returning to

Balkan countries from Syria and Iraq will likely find it very difficult to talk about such trauma, particularly sexual violence, given the deeply patriarchal nature of communities in the region.

While working to understand and reintegrate women who return from Syria and Iraq, policymakers and practitioners in the Balkans should not strictly regard women as the victims of violent extremism. As discussed earlier in this paper, there are several instances where women who returned to Kosovo express continued support for the so-called Islamic State. As an example, one woman who left the war-torn region explained, “I missed the life in Syria and Iraq, if there were no conflicts and killings I would continue to live there. The only solution for Muslims around the world is Islamic State and Caliphate.”⁵⁹ Ultimately, in order to create a sufficient response to the full range of women touched by violent extremism, it is necessary to consider all the factors that affect an individual's involvement, gender-related and otherwise.

Conclusive Recommendations

The issue of women in terrorist organizations has gained increasing attention at the international level, as entities like the United Nations Security Council address the matter through channels like the Counter-Terrorism Committee, and the Committee's Executive Directorate (CTED).⁶⁰ This recent focus appears motivated by increasing awareness about the participation of women in terrorism, along with a broader push to identify and promote roles for women in efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism. Several governments in Europe and the Western Balkan countries also see women in terrorism as a problem, but they do not usually approach the issue with the same treatment or sincerity as male fighters who join in the conflict to Syria and Iraq. In Kosovo, for example, the national strategy for the prevention of violent extremism leading to terrorism emphasizes the role of male foreign fighters the main risk.⁶¹ Moreover, the strategy only mentions the role of women preventing violent extremism once,⁶² further illustrating that gender-related considerations are not a priority.

Policymakers, practitioners, and scholars in the Western Balkans and beyond should consider the following points to create a more gender-aware response to terrorism and violent extremism:

- Governmental and non-governmental organizations working to prevent and counter violent extremism should advocate for programs that address the experiences of all people returning from conflict zones, including women, rather than focusing exclusively on men as foreign fighters. In this way, policymakers who are responsible for creating action plans to prevent and counter violent extremism can also pay greater attention to the social fabric of terrorist groups and work to understand the involvement of women.
- Women returning from the conflict in Iraq and Syria must be taken seriously by law enforcement authorities because some women continue to carry extremist ideology into their communities. At the same time, however, government institutions and communities should also offer assistance to reintegrate women that are not believed to be dangerous.
- Community engagement is critical to the success of state-sponsored programs designed to prevent and counter violent extremism. When it comes to reintegration, for example, the government must work with communities to reduce the stigmatization of men, women, and children returning from conflict zones. Government officials, for example, must be especially careful about the language and rhetoric they use to discuss returnees because their voices

influence the public's perception of the problem. Ultimately, women returning from Syria and Iraq appear disproportionately affected by prejudice and rejection from society, particularly if they remarried or had children abroad. While challenging, overcoming this barrier is crucial for the integration of these individuals.

- Entities tasked with preventing and countering violent extremism should promote the voices of those who can credibly speak against terrorist organizations, including women. The families of violent extremists, returnees, and others touched by violent extremism can provide especially compelling narratives and perspectives to condemn such actions. Additionally, in the Balkans, some women resisted pressure from their families and husbands to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Unfortunately, many of these women, particularly those who still have relatives living in Syria, are excluded from institutions. These women should be treated better and highlighted as role models for pushing against violent extremism. These women could be especially good at educating others in at-risk communities.
- Although increasing the participation of women in government and counter-extremism efforts is not necessarily a solution to terrorism and violent extremism, the empowerment of women in the Western Balkans is critical to progress. If women become a more significant part of the government's make-up and agenda, perhaps with time, there will be greater chances to address systemic issues regarding gender dynamics in these countries. The prevalence of domestic violence, for example, appears to relate to mobilization trends. Consequently, without addressing these underlying dynamics, governments may struggle to prevent and counter radicalization and recruitment in the future.

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- ³⁸Example of an individual posting content in a Facebook group that is sympathetic to IS, October 15, 2018 - KCSS Database on Social Media.
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- ⁴⁵Azinović, Vlado, and Edina Bećirević. 2017. “A Waiting Game: Assessing and Responding to the Threat from Returning Foreign Fighter.” *Regional Cooperation Council*. <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/54/awaiting-game-assessing-and-responding-to-the-threat-from-returning-foreign-fighters-in-the-westernbalkans>
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- ⁴⁷“Haradinaj: Gratë kosovare që shkuan në Siri kanë bërë fëmijë me komandantët e ISIS-it.” 2018. *Gazeta Express*. <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/haradinaj-grate-kosovare-qe-shkuan-ne-siri-kane-bere-femije-me-komandatet-e-isis-it-496998/?archive=1>
- ⁴⁸Please note that researchers conducted an interview with the brother of a woman who was held in “Anjnisa,” a Kurdish camp. Although the woman is called “Nesa” in this article, their real names will not be shared publicly for security reasons. The woman's brother also wanted to keep their name anonymous because of concerns regarding media reporting. (Interview with B.A, September 26, 2018.)
- ⁴⁹Interview with B.A September 26, 2018. (The brother of a woman held in the Kurdish Camp “Ajnisa”)
- ⁵⁰Interview with B.A September 26, 2018. (The brother of a woman held in the Kurdish Camp “Ajnisa”)
- ⁵¹Interview with B.A September 26, 2018. (The brother of a woman held in the Kurdish Camp “Ajnisa”)
- ⁵²Interview with B.A September 26, 2018. (The brother of a woman held in the Kurdish Camp “Ajnisa”)
- ⁵³Interview with B.A September 26, 2018. (The brother of a woman held in the Kurdish Camp “Ajnisa”)
- ⁵⁴Interview with B.A September 26, 2018. (The brother of a woman held in the Kurdish Camp “Ajnisa”)
- ⁵⁵Interview with B.A September 26, 2018. (The brother of a woman held in the Kurdish Camp “Ajnisa”)

⁵⁶Interview with B.A September 26, 2018. (The brother of a woman held in the Kurdish Camp “Ajnisa”)

⁵⁷Interview with B.A September 26, 2018. (The brother of a woman held in the Kurdish Camp “Ajnisa”)

⁵⁸Sahak, Abdul Matin. 2018. “‘Horrors that can't be told': Afghan women report Islamic State rapes.” *Reuters*.
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-islamic-state-rape/horrors-that-cant-be-told-afghan-women-report-islamic-state-rapes-idUSKBN1KK0WG>.

⁵⁹A.S interview with returned woman from Syria and Iraq in ISIS camp. October 4, 2016.

⁶⁰Security Council: Counter Terrorism-Committee, “Role of women in countering terrorism and violent extremism”
<https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/focus-areas/womens-role/>; Security Council, Counter Terrorism- Committee,
<https://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc11219.doc.htm>

⁶¹Strategy on prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism 2015-2020, Prishtina, September 2015 http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGJIA_parandalim_-_SHQIP.pdf

⁶²Strategy on prevention of violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism 2015-2020, Prishtina, September 2015 http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGJIA_parandalim_-_SHQIP.pdf