

CRUEL INTENTIONS



AUDREY ALEXANDER

Program on Extremism
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

CRUEL INTENTIONS

FEMALE JIHADISTS IN AMERICA

AUDREY ALEXANDER

NOVEMBER 2016

Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

© 2016 by Program on Extremism

Program on Extremism
2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 2210
Washington, DC 20052
www.cchs.gwu.edu/program-extremism

CONTENTS

About the Author | iv

Executive Summary | vi

Introduction | 1

Three Categories: Illustrated with Case Studies

1. Plotters | 7

2. Supporters | 9

3. Travelers | 15

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations | 21

THE PROGRAM ON EXTREMISM

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent 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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a Research Fellow at the Program on Extremism, Audrey Alexander focuses on the intersection of women in terrorism. Before joining the Program, she worked at King's College London's International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), where she utilized open source intelligence to analyze content and maintain a database of Western women relocating to ISIS-held territory. Alexander holds a Masters in Terrorism, Security & Society from the War Studies Department at King's College.



The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The self-proclaimed Islamic State and other jihadist actors have identified several unique roles for Western women in their radicalization and recruitment efforts. This report finds that, while few conduct violent plots, many disseminate propaganda, donate resources, or travel abroad to offer their support.
- A recent surge in relevant legal cases suggest that the rate of American female involvement in jihadist movements is on the rise.
- This report uses a wealth of primary and secondary data to examine the efforts of 25 jihadi women in America from January 2011 to September 2016.
- The cases offer a tremendous diversity of demographic data, suggesting that an overarching profile of the American female jihadist is indiscernible. Individuals hail from 14 different states and range from 15 to 44 years old, with an average age of 27. Women align themselves with a range of organizations including, but not limited to, the Islamic State, al-Shabaab, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda.
- Commonalities among the 25 cases inform a framework that sorts women's contributions into three overlapping categories: **Plotters**, **Supporters**, and **Travelers**.
 - **Plotters** design, attempt, or carry out domestic attacks.
 - **Supporters** garner material support within U.S. borders, disseminate propaganda, or conceal information about impending threats to advance the agenda of jihadist groups.
 - **Travelers** migrate in order to participate in the movement directly.
- While a few appear to act alone, many conduct activities in pairs, trios, and clusters alongside friends, siblings, and romantic partners.
- Online and offline dynamics complement one another and remain influential among jihadi women in America. Social media platforms are an especially common medium through which women are active, highlighting a vital opportunity for online detection and disruption.
- These findings contribute towards the development of policies to respond to this threat, which must be met with a varied response. Moreover, the diverse backgrounds of these cases render monolithic approaches ineffective.
- Though legal redress is the primary means to mitigate the threat, complementary strategies that offer alternatives to arrest, explore de-radicalization, and emphasize prevention are necessary steps to counter violent extremism by women.

INTRODUCTION¹

The notion of women in terrorism pushed its way to the forefront of the American mindset on December 2, 2015, when Tashfeen Malik and her husband, Syed Farook, opened fire at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California. After the couple killed 14 and injured 22, the growing threat posed by female jihadists in America became immediately apparent to policymakers, law enforcement officials, and the public.

Some reports, citing law enforcement officials, claim that Malik pledged allegiance to Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on Facebook the day of the attack.² IS later praised the couple's actions in *Dabiq*, its official English-language magazine, affiliating themselves with the duo.³ Despite these assertions, the FBI's most recent report has not yet determined a direct link to IS.⁴ Details about the couple's path to violence remain buried in an ongoing investigation that may take years to reach the public. In spite of this obstacle, Malik's case offers exceptional insight into the complex, morphing ventures of jihadist women in America.

It is difficult to discern the exact rate at which women participate in jihadist movements in the United States, but the surge in relevant legal cases suggests

this figure is on the rise. In the decade following 9/11, only a handful of prominent cases, like that of Aafia Siddiqui⁵ and Colleen LaRose,⁶ have shown the threat female jihadists could pose to national security. In recent years, instances of terrorism-related activity perpetrated by women have increased in number. Since 2011, at least 25 known cases of jihadi women with connections to the U.S. have emerged, shedding light on the myriad roles adopted by female jihadists. While few follow in Tashfeen Malik's footsteps and pursue violent plots, many disseminate propaganda or donate resources to show their support. In some instances, women travel abroad to make direct contributions to a particular group.

This report uses a wealth of primary and secondary data to examine the efforts of 25 American jihadi women since 2011.⁷ The cases offer a tremendous diversity of demographic data, suggesting that an overarching profile of the female jihadist is indiscernible. Moreover, within the dataset, women align themselves with a range of organizations including, but not limited to, IS, al-Shabaab, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda.

Based on the individual's aims within the movement, whether aspirational or achieved, there are three

-
1. This project was made possible by the Program's team of Research Associates and Assistants, especially Paige Pascarelli. The author would also like to thank Melanie Smith for her constructive feedback, and Larisa Baste for formatting this report.
 2. Pete Williams, Tom Winter, and Corky Siemaszko, "Tashfeen Malik, Mother in San Bernardino Massacre, Pledged Allegiance to ISIS Leader: Sources," *NBC News*, December 4, 2015; Dan Whitcomb and Mark Hosenball, "FBI investigating California massacre as 'act of terrorism,'" *Reuters*, December 4, 2015; Michael S. Schmidt and Richard Pérez-Peña, "F.B.I. Treating San Bernardino Attack as Terrorism Case," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2015.
 3. Islamic State, *Dabiq Magazine*, Issue 13.
 4. Dina Temple-Raston, "FBI Unable To Find Direct Link To Terror Group In San Bernardino Shooting," *NPR News*, December 16, 2015.
 5. Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani MIT graduate dubbed "Lady Al-Qaeda," is thought to have been one of the lone women in al-Qaeda's upper echelons. She is currently serving an 86-year prison sentence in the U.S. after she was convicted of attempted murder and assault of U.S. nationals, U.S. officers and employees in Afghanistan.
 6. Colleen LaRose, known by the pseudonym 'Jihad Jane,' is an American citizen accused of recruiting and encouraging individuals online to wage violent jihad and assassinate Lars Vilks, a Swedish cartoonist. She pleaded guilty to four terrorism-related charges and is currently serving a ten-year prison sentence.
 7. Cases are selected based on set criteria articulated in the methodology section of this paper.
-

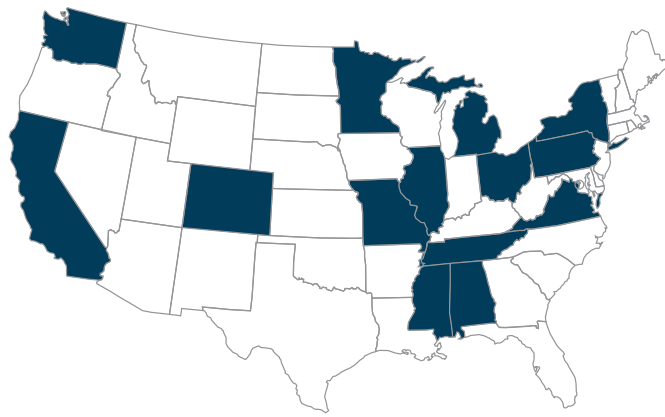
overlapping categories under which all 25 cases fall: **Plotters**, **Supporters**, and **Travelers**. **Plotters** design, attempt, or carry out domestic attacks. **Supporters** garner material support within U.S. borders, disseminate propaganda, or conceal information about impending threats to advance the agenda of jihadist groups. **Travelers** migrate in order to participate in the movement directly. The three categories are not mutually exclusive, but rather, a way to parse out the most common efforts of female jihadists. Ultimately, this fluid framework sheds light on a small but growing demographic of committed jihadists in America: women.

BACKGROUND

Women's contributions to jihadi activities are rarely static; they tend to change over time and vary between different organizations and conflicts.⁸ It is essential to first recognize how the historical distortion of women in conflict has led contemporary research to overlook or diminish activities perpetrated by women. Moreover, it is somewhat difficult to accept women as perpetrators and supporters of violence within organizations that subordinate women and employ gender-based violence. In any case, misconceptions and gender stereotypes obscure the scope of women's participation and commitment.⁹ Women assume roles ranging from mothers and recruiters to facilitators and martyrs.¹⁰ The lines of logic defining women's roles within jihadist groups

AMERICAN WOMEN IN JIHAD - KEY FACTS

Cases Examined:	25
Average Age:	Approximately 27
Age Range:	15-44 years old
States active:	14
States (name):	Alabama, California, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington



derive from various religious, ideological, logistical, social, and personal considerations.¹¹

In non-combative and auxiliary roles, women are recognized as an integral part of the equation because they serve, first and foremost, as supportive wives and mothers to the next generation. Many jihadist organizations depend on women to “advance jihad in the domestic sphere and also in the public sphere through raising money for jihadis and preaching the merit of jihad to others in mosques, print, and online publications.”¹²

8. Farhana Qazi, “The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam,” *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, (2011): 48.

9. Mia Bloom, *Bombshell, Women and Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). Preface.

10. Kim Cragin and Sara A. Daly, *Women as Terrorists: Mothers, Recruiters, and Martyrs* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009).

11. Angela Dalton and Victor Asal, “Is It Ideology or Desperation: Why Do Organizations Deploy Women in Violent Terrorist Attacks?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34 (2011): 813. See also Karla J. Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26 (2003): 171-195; Laura Sjoborg, Grace D. Cooke, and Stacy Reiter Neal, Introduction to *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, ed. Laura Sjoborg and Caron E. Gentry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

12. Nelly Lahoud, “The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis’ Exclusion of Women,” *Jihad, Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (2014): 783.

Ultimately, the majority of women's contributions to jihadi organizations occur beneath the surface "in different and less visible roles."¹³ Female jihadists are certainly consistent in their roles as wives and mothers, but their propensity for nurturing and sustenance can transcend such roles when they take proactive, non-static steps to support their organization.

In many ways, globalization has transformed the scope of women's contributions to jihadist groups by facilitating the movement of people, resources, and communications. The proliferation of mobile banking, for example, makes financial donations more feasible. The act of *Hijrah*, the migration to Muslim lands from a place perceived to be hostile to Muslims,¹⁴ is made accessible by faster, cheaper travel. Evolving media technologies allow jihadi sympathizers, including women, to amplify their messages to larger audiences. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, women published calls to action through mediums like extremist magazines.¹⁵ By the mid to late 2000s, various documents written by women circulated the Internet with ease.¹⁶ Even in a predominantly supportive capacity, the nature of women's activities and their influential reach is now drastically different.

More contemporary platforms such as Twitter, Telegram, and Tumblr allow women to advance the jihadi agenda from any location in the world by disseminating propaganda, raising funds, and facilitating contacts. An adverse side effect of the world's increasing connectivity, both physical and virtual, is the

abundance of new ways in which both men and women can act upon their support. In a piece on the social media networks of Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, Jytte Klausen explains, "online, women are mobilized as partisans and in tactical support roles to an extent far surpassing their involvement in any previous jihadist insurgency."¹⁷ A recent study of IS's social media network on VKontakte (VK), a Russian platform, reveals that, while outnumbered by pro-IS men online, pro-IS women "emerge with superior network connectivity" which researchers suggest "can benefit the underlying system's robustness and survival."¹⁸ A better understanding of the relationship between women's evolving support roles and the longevity of jihadi initiatives may assist policymakers and law enforcement officials in their efforts to disrupt terror networks.

Despite their proclivity for auxiliary roles, female jihadists have perpetrated attacks on numerous occasions.¹⁹ The subject of women fighting in jihad remains contested in classical and contemporary Islamic literature, among jihadi ideologues and academics.²⁰ Though organizations tend to exclude women from violent operations, the prescribed guidelines regarding the nature of women's contributions blur in select circumstances, especially when a woman's involvement is deemed necessary or if an organization is in dire straits. Moreover, an increasing reliance on directed attacks and lone-actors by jihadist organizations requires group leaders to relinquish command and control, diminishing their desire

13. Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38 (2015): 497.

14. *Ibid.*, 495.

15. Qazi, "The Mujahidaat."

16. *Ibid.*

17. Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38 (2015): 16.

18. Pedro Manrique et al., "Women's connectivity in extreme networks," *Science Advances* 2 (2016).

19. Notable examples include Islamist Chechen suicide bombers, as well as members of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and al-Qaeda in Iraq. See Mia Bloom, "Bombshells: Women and Terror," *Gender Issues* 28 (2011): 5-6. See also, Claudia Brunner, "Female suicide bombers – Male suicide bombing? Looking for Gender in reporting the suicide bombings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," *Global Society* 19 (2005): 29-48.

20. David Cook, "Women Fighting in Jihad?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28 (2005): 375-384.

and ability to impose more traditional gender structures. In September 2016, for example, a network of radicalized French women reportedly “guided” by IS attempted to ignite a car packed with gas cylinders near Notre Dame Cathedral.²¹ In this way, women in the French cell and even Tashfeen Malik, the San Bernardino shooter, expand the roles of female jihadists in the West.

With these points clarified, this report returns to the contributions of jihadi women in America since 2011. Although some latent stereotypes assume women are naively duped into participation or are depraved instigators of violence, this report refutes various misconceptions by presenting comprehensive accounts of activities perpetrated by female jihadists. In doing so, it strives to contribute to a small but growing body of literature that disaggregates terrorist violence and examines the ever-expanding efforts of female jihadists, particularly in the West.

METHOD

This paper draws on 25 cases from January 2011 to September 2016 in order to conduct a comprehensive review of the most recent wave of jihadist-related activity perpetrated by women in America.²² Although this date range may appear arbitrary, researchers believe that the last five years provide a wide range of cases to study.²³ Additionally, because of the timeline of the Syrian civil war and the Arab Spring, this period also offers a robust climate for the emergence and proliferation of various jihadist groups in the Middle East and North Africa, and of their sympathizers abroad.

Despite a notable uptick in women’s participation, one must articulate the limitations posed by the small scale

of the investigation, specifically on the transferability of insights and lessons gleaned from the cases. Moreover, the inherent difficulty of designing a methodology geared towards understanding these individuals and the roles they seek to fulfill must be stated from the outset. The study of persons who support foreign terrorist organizations presents significant research barriers to which this project is not immune. Though interviews are the desired method of data collection, most of the subjects in the report are inaccessible due to their migration, incarceration, deportation, or even death. In some instances, lawyers discourage and decline interviews with their clients to mitigate the risk of undermining their case in court.

Despite these barriers, researchers have used a wealth of primary and secondary sources to evaluate the roles jihadi women aspire to and fulfill. These include social media accounts, news reports, jihadi propaganda, official press releases, legal documents, and notes from a federal bench trial. Facts are corroborated whenever possible to counteract the varying reliability of sources, and weight is given to more credible sources when inconsistencies emerge. For example, court document and official press releases are given more credence than news reports and social media accounts.

One final caveat pertains to the completeness of the information gathered from multiple sources. Primary and secondary documents, no matter how reliable, offer an overview of important details, leaving the minutiae of the case largely unreported. Although researchers can configure relevant pieces of information from various documents, it is crucial to acknowledge the extent to which case-related details about an individual’s network, motives, or behaviors, are not publicly available.

-
21. Angelique Chrisafis, “Cell of French women guided by Isis behind failed Notre Dame attack,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2016.
 22. Cases are identified using news articles, legal documents, and official press releases. Furthermore, this report excludes some cases because of insufficient evidence regarding the individual’s identity, connections to the U.S., or the nature of their jihadist activity. Excluded cases: Deka Abdalla Sheikh, Amina Khan, ‘Alex,’ and ‘Umm Waqqas’
 23. Klausen, “Tweeting the Jihad.” See also, Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)* and *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*, (ICSR), (2015).

For this reason, the case descriptions in the following section do not present a complete portrait of an individual's actions and aspirations. Likewise, because case-related details emerge on different, sometimes inconsistent timelines, the author may have inadvertently excluded information released very recently.

Finally, as discussed in the introduction, this report draws from 25 cases and their respective documents to discern the diverse contributions women make to jihadist groups in America. Commonalities among

the 25 cases, which are also supported by existing literature, inform a framework that sorts women's contributions, both aspirational and achieved, into three overlapping categories: Plotters, Supporters, and Travelers. In many instances, individuals do not fit neatly into one category: travelers, for example, sometimes act as supporters before traveling abroad. In this context, the three categories are not mutually exclusive, but rather, a way to parse out some of the most common efforts of female jihadists.

1. PLOTTERS

Within the proposed framework, plotters encompass individuals who design or carry out domestic attacks. Of the 25 cases, three fall within this category: Asia Siddiqui, Noelle Velentzas, and Tashfeen Malik.

Asia Siddiqui and **Noelle Velentzas**, two friends from Queens, NY, were arrested in April 2015 for “conspiring to prepare an explosive device to be detonated in a terrorist attack in the United States.”²⁴ From approximately August 2014 to March 2015, Siddiqui and Velentzas researched and acquired the necessary materials to create improvised explosive devices by studying chemistry books, the *Anarchist Cookbook*,²⁵ and instructions in jihadist online publications.²⁶ Siddiqui had long established links with jihadist networks and published a poem inciting violence in *Jihad Recollections*, an al-Qaeda propaganda magazine.²⁷ Velentzas, who allegedly lived with Siddiqui for some time, espoused violent jihadist ideology and “repeatedly expressed an interest in terrorist attacks committed within the United States” as early as 2013.²⁸ In a conversation with an undercover officer, Velentzas explained that she “did not understand why people were traveling overseas to wage jihad when there were more opportunities of ‘pleasing Allah’” within the U.S.²⁹ After the women unknowingly disclosed their plots

to the undercover officer in a series of conversations, authorities apprehended and arrested them.³⁰ Prior to their arrest, Velentzas kept a “knife and an axe” at her residence and Siddiqui possessed “multiple propane gas tanks, as well as instructions for how to transform propane tanks into explosive devices.”³¹ Both pleaded not guilty to the charges in May 2015; their trials are ongoing.³²

Tashfeen Malik, mentioned in the introduction of this report, was one of two perpetrators of the December 2015 attack in San Bernardino, California. How long the couple plotted for the attack is unknown, but FBI Director James Comey said that the couple held extremist views for “quite a long time before their attack.”³³ Private communications between Malik and Farook, which began in late 2013, contained discussions of jihad and martyrdom.³⁴ The significance of Malik’s violent actions reverberated far beyond their immediate tactical targets, and long after the attack. In the thirteenth issue of IS’s *Dabiq* magazine, Malik’s act was used as a recruitment tool to shame men into participation, a tactic employed by many other jihadist groups.³⁵ The feature explains, “the brother’s blessed wife [Malik] accompanied him despite the fact that combat is not even obligatory

24. *United States v. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit (2015).

25. First published in 1971 in protest of US involvement in Vietnam, includes, among other things, instructions on building explosives.

26. *United States v. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui*.

27. *Ibid.*; *Jihad Recollections* is also the predecessor to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s (AQAP) propaganda magazine *Inspire* magazine.

28. *United States v. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui*.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. Ray Sanchez, “N.Y. women accused of ISIS-inspired bomb plot plead not guilty,” *CNN*, May 7, 2015.

33. Adam Goldman, Mike Berman, and Missy Ryan, “San Bernardino shooter’s former neighbor who bought rifles is cooperating with authorities,” *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2015.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Mia Bloom, “Bombshells: Women and Terrorism,” *Gender Issues* 28 (2011): 1-21.

upon her, but she did not want to lose the opportunity for *shahadah* [martyrdom] at a time when many ‘men’ of the *Ummah* [global Muslim community] have turned away from the obligation of jihad.”³⁶ Though Malik’s actions firmly place her in a league of plotters, her action had far-reaching propagandistic effects.

Even though very few female jihadists in America assume roles as **plotters**, they are a dangerous segment of a larger movement. Asia Siddiqui, Noelle Velentzas, and Tashfeen Malik opted for violent activity rather than travel abroad or contributions in a supportive capacity. Though the exact catalyst for these women’s participation is unknown, it is interesting to note that each acted alongside at least one co-conspirator. These cases underline the idea that the drivers of women’s engagement require further consideration; although their efforts might reflect changing attitudes about formerly gendered, now-permissible activities, violence by female jihadists in America could also be a symptom of the movement’s increasing reliance on lone-actors, self-starters, and small, disconnected groups. A diffused, non-localized interpretation of violent jihad means that anyone, including women, can heed the call to action if they so desire.

the Khilāfah! And the brother’s blessed wife accompanied him despite the fact that combat is not even obligatory upon her, but she did not want to lose the opportunity for shahādah at a time when many “men” of the Ummah have turned away from the obligation of jihād.

May 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, and Australia.

Excerpts regarding the involvement of Tashfeen Malik in the December 2, 2015 attack in San Bernardino, California from Dabiq magazine, Issue 13.

36. Islamic State, *Dabiq Magazine*, Issue 13.

2. SUPPORTERS

Supporters garner material support within U.S. borders, disseminate propaganda, or conceal information about impending threats in order to advance the agenda of jihadist groups. They also make up a large portion of jihadist activity by women in America, in part because it is the easiest form of participation. Further investigation shows that these actions vary tremendously, ranging from posting propaganda online to sending tactical gear abroad. The cumulative effect of such contributions is the amplification of the message and the sustenance of the movement.

Oytun Ayse Mihalik, a Turkish citizen who lived in Orange County, California, was arrested on August 27, 2011 as she prepared to board a one-way flight to Turkey.³⁷ Mihalik was charged with three counts of providing material support to a terrorist in Pakistan and one count of making a false statement.³⁸ Using her own name as well as the alias “Cindy Palmer,” Mihalik sent three money transfers totaling \$2,050 to an individual in Pakistan.³⁹ When questioned by special agents from the FBI and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) at Los Angeles International Airport, Mihalik lied that she never sent money using any name other than her own. Shortly after her arrest, Mihalik told the FBI that she “believed” Ebu Yasir, the man she wired money to, “was a member of the Taliban and Al

Qaeda.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, Mihalik reportedly admitted “she knew he was using her money for *mujahadin* operations against the American military forces in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region.”⁴¹ As part of her plea deal, Mihalik agreed to forfeit her lawful permanent resident status in the U.S. and return to Turkey after serving her prison sentence.⁴² According to a press release from U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, Mihalik was turned over to Turkish authorities in Istanbul in February 2016.⁴³

In August 2013, **Saynab Abdirashid Hussein** pleaded guilty to one count of perjury for lying under oath before a Grand Jury. Although some of her illegal activity occurred before 2011, when Hussein was a teenager, she was charged within the predetermined timeframe used in this report. Between 2007 and 2008, Hussein received a call from Ahmed Ali Omar, a former high school classmate in Minneapolis who had traveled to Somalia to join al-Shabaab.⁴⁴ Omar allegedly asked her to speak with Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan (“Miski”), another classmate who told her that Ethiopians invaded Somalia and were “raping women and children” and “desecrating the Koran.”⁴⁵ Miski asked Hussein if she wanted to support the movement against the Ethiopians, and introduced Hussein to his sisters.⁴⁶ In collaboration with Miski’s sisters, Hussein raised \$1,300 to purchase Miski’s plane tickets.⁴⁷

37. Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Orange County Woman Sentenced to Five Years in Federal Prison for Providing Material Support to Terrorists by Sending Money to Pakistan to be Used in Attacks Against U.S. Forces Overseas,” March 29, 2013.

38. *USA v. Oytun Ayse Mihalik*, Government’s Response to Defendant’s Sentencing Memorandum (2013).

39. *USA v. Oytun Ayse Mihalik*, First Superseding Indictment (2011).

40. *USA v. Oytun Ayse Mihalik*, Government’s Response to Defendant’s Sentencing Memorandum (2013).

41. Ibid.

42. *USA v. Oytun Ayse Mihalik*, Order of Removal (2013).

43. Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Orange County Woman Sentenced.”

44. Erin Golden, “Terror recruiter with roots in Minn. linked to Texas shooting,” *Star Tribune*, May 9, 2015.

45. *USA v. Saynab Abdirashid Hussein*, Saynab Hussein’s Position Regarding Sentencing (2013).

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

<u>Count</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>From</u>	<u>To</u>	<u>Amount</u>
2	February 8, 2011	Muna Osman Jama	Fardowsa Jama Mohamed	\$100
3	March 11, 2011	Muna Osman Jama	Fardowsa Jama Mohamed	\$100
4	April 14, 2011	Ali B. Sheikh	Fardowsa Jama Mohamed	\$100
5	May 6, 2011	Muna Osman Jama	Fardowsa Jama Mohamed	\$100
6	June 12, 2011	Ali B. Sheikh	Fardowsa Jama Mohamed	\$100
7	August 5, 2011	Muna Osman Jama	Fardowsa Jama Mohamed	\$200
8	August 30, 2011	Muna Osman Jama	Fardowsa Jama Mohamed	\$1,500
9	November 8, 2011	Muna Osman Jama	Fardowsa Jama Mohamed	\$50
10	December 10, 2011	Ali B. Sheikh	Fardowsa Jama Mohamed	\$50

Examples of some of the transfers Muna Osman Jama sent to Fardowsa Jama Mohamed, an al-Shabaab facilitator in Kenya. Source: USA v. Muna Osman Jama, et al, Superseding Indictment, (June 26, 2014).

Hussein's email records also indicated her interest in a larger network of supporters, including al-Shabaab operatives abroad with whom she discussed potential financial schemes.⁴⁸

The Operation Rhino investigation, which sought to uncover a prominent cluster of U.S.-linked al-Shabaab sympathizers, revealed Hussein's contributions.⁴⁹ She was called to testify in front of a federal grand jury, where she denied knowledge of anyone raising money for Minnesotans traveling to Somalia to fight against Ethiopian troops supporting the Transitional Government in Somalia.⁵⁰ Hussein reportedly lied again during a questioning by agents in 2012.⁵¹ Hussein has since expressed remorse, moved away from Minneapolis,

cut off ties with her former network, and pleaded guilty.⁵² She was sentenced to a 36-month probation.

In July 2014, authorities arrested **Muna Osman Jama** in Virginia and **Hinda Osman Dhirane** in Washington, charging both women and three others with 20 counts of providing material support to al-Shabaab.⁵³ According to legal documents and evidence presented at a July 2016 federal bench trial, the women participated in an elaborate scheme to transmit funds to al-Shabaab facilitators in Kenya and Somalia.⁵⁴ Jama, Dhirane, and several of their co-conspirators used coded language to disguise their fundraising efforts: the terms "orphans" and "the family" referred to al-Shabaab, while "living expenses" meant money

48. *USA v. Saynab Abdirashid Hussein*, Government's Response to Defendant's Position Regarding Sentencing (2014).

49. Golden, "Terror recruiter."

50. *USA v. Saynab Hussein*, Information (2013).

51. Golden, "Terror recruiter."

52. *USA v. Saynab Abdirashid Hussein*, Saynab Hussein's Position Regarding Sentencing.

53. Please note that the three other defendants are not included in this investigation. Farhia Hassan was arrested at her residence in the Netherlands; Fardowsa Jama Mohamed is a fugitive in Kenya and the subject of a pending arrest warrant; and Barira Hassan Abdullahi is a fugitive in Somalia and also the subject of a pending arrest warrant. See *USA v. Muna Osman Jama, et al*, Superseding Indictment (2014); See also Department of Justice Press Release, "Three Defendants Arrested on Charges of Material Support to a Foreign Terrorist Organization," July 23, 2014.

54. *USA v. Muna Osman Jama, et al*, Trial Brief of the United States (2016).

collected for the organization.⁵⁵ As seen below, Jama and Dhirane transferred money in small quantities to avoid detection.⁵⁶ In sum, Jama alone sent over \$3,000 to facilitators in Kenya and Somalia.⁵⁷ Through phone calls, chat rooms⁵⁸, and private messages, the women discussed their efforts, hosted lectures, and encouraged a select cluster of women to support al-Shabaab.⁵⁹ At its height, the cohort consisted of 15 women from approximately six countries including, but not limited to, the Netherlands, Canada, and the United Kingdom.⁶⁰

Evidence from the ongoing federal bench trial of Jama and Dhirane revealed the involvement of Minnesotan **Amina Mohamud Esse**, who pleaded guilty to charges of supporting al-Shabaab in November 2014.⁶¹ From approximately December 2011 to April 2012, “at the direction of Virginia-based co-conspirator Muna Osman Jama,” Esse provided over \$500 over the course of several transactions to the Kenya-based al-Shabaab facilitator.⁶² As part of her plea agreement, Esse agreed to cooperate with the government’s investigation by providing all the information she knew concerning al-Shabaab, testifying in trials, and working proactively with law enforcement to identify other co-conspirators.⁶³ Due to safety concerns, Esse’s court documents

remained sealed until she testified in the trial of Jama and Dhirane in July 2016. During the testimony, Esse described the cluster’s dynamics, tactics, and motives, as well as expressed regret for her participation in the scheme.⁶⁴ Esse is awaiting sentencing pending the outcome of her cooperation.

In February 2015, **Heather Elizabeth Coffman**, a Virginia resident, pleaded guilty to making a false statement involving international terrorism.⁶⁵ Prior to her arrest, Coffman espoused pro-IS rhetoric and posted their propaganda on various Facebook accounts.⁶⁶ Though Coffman’s efforts to radicalize and recruit her sister ultimately proved unsuccessful, she continued proactively supporting IS-sympathizers online.⁶⁷ Over Facebook, Coffman told an undercover FBI agent about her efforts to help an online love interest travel to “a country bordering Syria” to meet IS facilitators, join as a fighter, and become a martyr.⁶⁸ After he backed out of the plan, Coffman conveyed her frustration to the agent, stating “I want him [referring to her romantic partner] in Syria and I want him to die as a *shaheed*,”⁶⁹ disclosing Coffman’s desire to successfully facilitate the individual’s travel to IS-held territory. After the agent established a rapport with Coffman, she

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. *USA v. Muna Osman Jama, et al*, Superseding Indictment (2014).

58. The women participated in multiples chat rooms of various sizes, predominantly on the platform PalTalk. One in particular, ISDAC, is known for hosting several pro-Shabaab lecturers including al-Shabaab cleric Sheikh Abdulkadir Mumin

59. Author’s notes from the federal bench trial of Muna Osman Jama and Hinda Osman Dhirane (July 11-13, 2016).

60. Ibid.

61. Stephen Montemayor, “Minnesota woman’s Al-Shabab guilty plea unveiled, linked to Virginia terror case,” *Star Tribune*, July 1, 2016. See also, *USA v. Muna Osman Jama, et al*, Trial Brief.

62. *USA v. Amina Mohamud Esse*, Joint Motion to Close Defendant’s Guilty Plea and Seal the Transcript of the Hearing (2016).

63. Ibid.

64. Author’s notes from the federal bench trial of Muna Osman Jama and Hinda Osman Dhirane.

65. *United States v. Heather Elizabeth Coffman*, Plea Agreement (2015).

66. Coffman had set her location on one of the accounts to Hafsarjah, Idlib, Syria, which could be read as an attempt to amplify the potency of her messages, and expand the range of her social media audience. See *United States v. Heather Elizabeth Coffman*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit (2014).

67. *United States v. Heather Elizabeth Coffman*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

offered contacts to the agent in order to facilitate their travel abroad.⁷⁰ In a subsequent interview with two FBI special agents, Coffman then lied and withheld information about her efforts to provide contacts to, and facilitate the travel of, an alleged IS sympathizer. In May 2015, a federal court sentenced Coffman to 54 months in prison followed by three years of probation.

In February 2015, **Jasminka Ramic, Mediha (Medy) Salkicevic**, and **Sedina Unkic Hodzic** were arrested for providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization.⁷¹ The women, all originally Bosnian citizens, were part of a larger funding scheme involving a cluster of six individuals, male and female, from Missouri, Illinois, and New York. Using PayPal and Western Union to collect funds, and Facebook to communicate with one another, the cohort bought U.S. military uniforms, surplus gear, combat boots, rifle scopes and other weapon accessories, and supplies.⁷² Through intermediaries in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, they shipped the materials to foreign fighters in Syria, including Bosnian-American fighter Abdullah Ramo Pazara,⁷³ who allegedly rose to the rank of deputy to Omar al-Shishani, a top IS commander.⁷⁴ The shipments began in August 2013—slightly after Pazara left for Syria—and continued until September 2014, when Pazara was killed fighting for IS.⁷⁵

Ramic, Salkicevic, and Hodzic each had varying levels of involvement. Sedina Hodzic, along with her husband, Ramiz Hodzic, was one of the major facilitators of the funding scheme. The couple collected monetary transfers from the network, purchased the military equipment, and shipped it abroad to aid foreign fighters in Syria.⁷⁶ Salkicevic and Ramic allegedly passed



Photo of Ramiz and Sedina Hodzic from a Bosnian news outlet. Source: “USA: Due to the support ISIL and Al-Qaeda were arrested five immigrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina,” Federalna, 2015.



Photo of Abdullah Ramo Pazara, the Bosnian-American IS fighter that Ramic, Salkicevic, and Hodzic sent resources to.

70. Ibid.

71. *United States v. Hodzic, et al.*, Indictment (2015).

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.

74. Robert Patrick, “Allegations of St. Louis Terrorism Support Rooted Back in Bosnian War,” *St. Louis Today.com*, April 11, 2015.

75. *United States v. Hodzic, et al.*, Indictment.

76. Ibid.



Examples of various tweets from accounts linked to Safya Yassin (user names: @OO1_Muslimah_, @Muslimahh_224, @Musliimah1)

funds to the Hodzics for the couple to send along to support foreign fighters in Syria.⁷⁷ While Hodzic appeared to be aware of Pazara's allegiance to IS, commenting on and 'liking' his IS-related Facebook posts, Ramic and Salkicevic allegedly expressed their personal concern for the plight of the Syrian people.⁷⁸ In this way, the Hodzics' leadership demonstrates the value of men and women in advancing the jihadist agenda in a supportive capacity. The trials of Hodzic and Salkicevic are ongoing; Ramic pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support and was sentenced to three years in January 2016.⁷⁹

In February 2016, authorities arrested Missouri resident **Safya Roe Yassin** for transmitting threats to injure federal government personnel.⁸⁰ The FBI was alerted to Yassin's online presence after someone called in a complaint in January 2015 to report concerns that Yassin was rallying support for IS.⁸¹ For months, the FBI tracked Yassin's various Twitter, Facebook, and Google+ accounts. For over a year, Yassin amplified her voice and expanded her reach by creating multiple accounts with which she disseminated content promoting IS's message of violent jihad.⁸² Despite numerous account suspensions for Twitter's violating terms of service, she proved resilient: by January 27, 2016, the FBI had identified 97 accounts that were "likely" linked to Yassin.⁸³ On August 24, 2015, months before her arrest, the FBI recorded Yassin tweeting personal information, including the names, locations, and phone numbers, of three federal employees listed under the title, "Wanted to Kill."⁸⁴ Yassin's large following of sympathizers made the threat all the more potent, merging into an echo chamber of ardent supporters. Even though reports quoting Yassin's friends and family say

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

79. Department of Justice Press Release, "Illinois Woman Sentenced on Charges of Conspiracy," January 5, 2016.

80. *United States v. Safya Roe Yassin*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit (2016).

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid.

“she’s a harmless, lonely mother...who was desperate for connection,”⁸⁵ Yassin’s facilitative significance lies in her dissemination of pro-IS propaganda and reiteration of violent threats.

They neither plotted domestic attacks nor traveled abroad, but the women in the **supporters** category nevertheless illustrate the auxiliary ways in which U.S.-based women assist jihadists and sustain the movement. Some women serve in supportive roles

independently while others coordinate schemes in larger clusters and networks. Within this category, there is a low threshold for participation: typical offenses include disseminating propaganda, raising funds, recruiting others, facilitating contacts, arranging travel, and lying to officials to cover up jihadist activity. Much like the factors that lead women to plot attacks, future research must unpack the drivers that lead women to serve in supportive capacities as well.

85. Katie Zavadski, “The American Anti-Vaccine Mom Turned ISIS Superstar,” *The Daily Beast*, March 29, 2016.

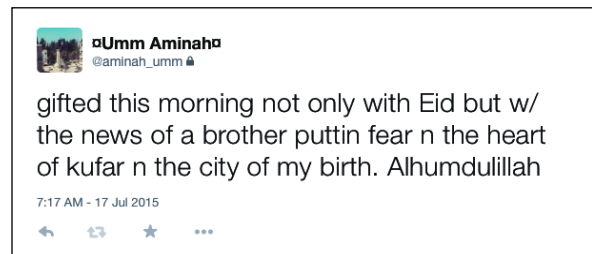
3. TRAVELERS

Unlike the other two categories, **travelers** move abroad to engage in the movement directly. The dominant contribution is their mere physical participation in jihadist groups. Aside from relocating, their auxiliary contributions are manifold.

Nicole Lynn Mansfield, a 33-year-old from Flint, Michigan, likely traveled to Syria in 2013, prior to the official declaration of the self-proclaimed Caliphate.⁸⁶ As the Syrian civil war entangled Islamist rebel groups propped against the government, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish individuals' affiliations.⁸⁷ Reports suggest that Syrian government forces killed Mansfield and two men in Idlib province after she allegedly tossed a grenade at the service members.⁸⁸ As mentioned earlier, women rarely participate in violent attacks unless it is considered necessary. One report added that sources "believed" Mansfield may have assumed a support role as a "lookout" or a "media coordinator" for one of the many Islamist rebel groups battling the Syrian government there.⁸⁹ Mansfield's group affiliation remains somewhat contested as Syrian government television claimed she had ties to al-Nusra front, which previously had ties to al-Qaeda, while another Sunni extremist group, Ahrar al-Sham, claimed that Mansfield represented their organization.⁹⁰ Mansfield was the first known American woman killed in the Syrian conflict.

Ariel Bradley, a U.S. citizen from Chattanooga, Tennessee, reportedly traveled to IS-controlled territory

with her Iraqi-born husband, Yasin Mohamed, in early 2014.⁹¹ After meeting Mohamed online, Bradley flew to Sweden to meet him in person and married him shortly thereafter.⁹² Their daughter was born in the U.S., and following the family's alleged travel abroad, their son was born in Syria in 2015.⁹³ Aside from traveling to participate in IS's state building mission, Bradley's predominant contribution to the effort was that of a supportive wife and mother. Bradley seized media attention in the wake of the July 2015 Chattanooga shooting, after which she tweeted her praise for the attack and noted her pride in it taking place in her hometown.⁹⁴ In this capacity, Bradley endorsed violent tactics and subsequently incited violence. Under another account, Bradley's sinister persona belied the positive narrative she offered her followers through



*Screenshot illustrating Ariel Bradley's support for the July 2015 Chattanooga shooting. Source: Ellie Hall, "How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian To ISIS Bride," *Buzzfeed*, June 20, 2015.*

86. Jennifer Preston, "Michigan Woman Killed in Syria War, Reports Say," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2013.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

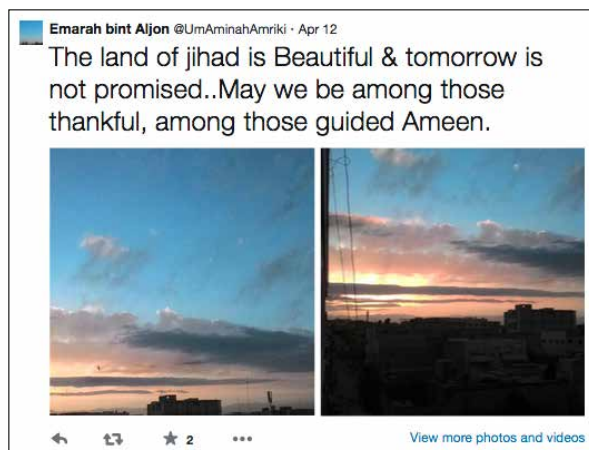
90. Niraj Warikoo, "From Michigan to a violent death in Syria," *USA Today*, June 30, 2013.

91. Ellie Hall, "How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian To ISIS Bride," *Buzzfeed*, June 20, 2015.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.



Archived example: Ariel Bradley as user Emarah bint Aljon, @UmAminahAmriki, April 12, 2015.

tweets of sunsets and cityscapes.⁹⁵ Bradley's tweets serve a specific function: by juxtaposing the violence with pretty and endearing images, she created her own sort of propaganda that sought to encourage other women to follow her lead by romanticizing the journey, or at the very least, normalizing the experience.

In May 2016, a *NBC News* report revealed that **Zakia Nasrin** had traveled to Syria with her younger brother, Rasel Raihan, and her husband, Jaffrey Khan.⁹⁶ Files leaked to the press by an alleged IS defector contained evidence that the two men had "enlisted" with IS in July 2014.⁹⁷ Despite the fact that Nasrin is not

referenced in the documents, she is believed to be the cluster's connective tissue.⁹⁸ According to one news report, Nasrin and Raihan's family moved to Ohio from Bangladesh in 2000.⁹⁹ Nasrin enrolled at Ohio State University after graduating within the top tier of her Columbus-based high school in 2010, ultimately moving to California to marry Khan instead.¹⁰⁰ The couple moved back to the Columbus area in 2013, eventually sharing an apartment with Raihan.¹⁰¹ After a short stint in California in 2014, leaked documents suggest the cluster entered Syria through the town of Tel Abyad and joined IS.¹⁰² According to Khan's relatives, Nasrin and her husband worked at a Raqqa-based hospital whereas Raihan was reportedly killed.¹⁰³ Khan's mother, who engages in irregular communications with the couple, recently received a photo of their baby daughter.¹⁰⁴ Although little is known about the case writ large, Nasrin's actions fulfill the most basic and traditional role as wife and mother.

Yusra Ismail, a 20-year-old from St. Paul, Minnesota, reportedly stole a friend's passport to travel to Syria.¹⁰⁵ The Somali teen, who is not a U.S. citizen, was eventually charged (in absentia) with stealing and misusing a passport. Ismail unlawfully traveled to Amsterdam on August 21, 2014, journeying on to Oslo the following day.¹⁰⁶ From there, Ismail likely made her way to Syria. On the day of her departure, Ismail reportedly told her family she was attending a bridal shower and claimed she would stay the night

95. Archived Example: Emarah bint Aljon @UmAminahAmriki, April 12, 2015.

96. Richard Engel, Ben Plessner, and Tracy Connor, "An American ISIS Cell: The Story of 3 U.S. Recruits," *NBC News*, May 17, 2016.

97. Ibid.

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid.

100. Ibid.

101. Ibid.

102. Ibid.

103. "Leaked Thumb Drive Offers Insight into lives of Americans who joined ISIS," *The Week*, May 16, 2016.

104. Engel et al., "An American ISIS Cell".

105. The United States Attorney's Office District of Minnesota, "Minnesota woman charged with stealing passport to travel to Syria," December 2, 2014.

106. *United States v. Yusra Ismail*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit (2014).

because she could not find a ride home.¹⁰⁷ Ismail's family did not hear from her until August 24, 2014, when they received a note (via a messaging app) explaining that Ismail traveled to "Sham," a common term used to describe territory IS seeks to control.¹⁰⁸ Despite Ismail's promise to return home to her family,¹⁰⁹ there is no record of her entering the United States.¹¹⁰ Ismail's exact contributions to the movement are unknown as she remains at large and lacks a significant online presence.

In October 2014, an unnamed minor from the Chicago area, identified as the **17-year-old sister of Mohammed Hamzah Khan**, planned to travel to the Turkish-Syrian border alongside her two brothers, aged 19 and 16. Authorities intervened at Chicago O'Hare International Airport and interviewed the siblings.¹¹¹ Prior to the trio's attempted departure, Mohammed's sister "observed, and later took part in" online conversations "debating the value of various jihadist groups" among several other topics.¹¹² According to the factual basis of Mohammed Khan's plea agreement, he and his sister used the Internet to establish contacts in IS-controlled territory and

coordinate travel logistics.¹¹³ According to one report, Mohammed's sister "desired jihad, though she knew she'd never be allowed to fight."¹¹⁴ The teenager's "role, she understood, would be as a wife who would help raise the next generation of *mujahideen*."¹¹⁵ Mohammed, the oldest of the trio, faced legal repercussions and pleaded guilty to attempting to provide material support to IS;¹¹⁶ authorities released the two younger siblings, both minors, to their parents.¹¹⁷

In October 2014, **three runaway Colorado teenagers** were detained by German authorities in Frankfurt International Airport as they traveled to Turkey en route to Syria.¹¹⁸ The trio, consisting of two sisters, aged 15 and 17, and their 16-year-old friend reportedly disappeared on October 17.¹¹⁹ According to a redacted Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office Offense Report, Ali Farah, the father of the two sisters, left his daughters at home after they claimed to be sick.¹²⁰ But when Farah returned from work, he found his daughters missing and their friend's father, Assad Ibrahim, at his home saying that his daughter and her passport had also gone missing.¹²¹ Farah quickly realized that the sisters' passports, along with \$2,000, were missing as well.¹²² The families

107. Laura Yuen, "Gone to Syria: Family fears woman latest Minnesotan drawn to war-torn region," *MPR News*, September 11, 2014.

108. *United States v. Yusra Ismail*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit.

109. Yuen, "Gone to Syria."

110. *United States v. Yusra Ismail*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit.

111. *United States v. Mohammed Hamzah Khan*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit (2014).

112. Janet Reitman, "The Children of ISIS," *The Rolling Stone*, March 25, 2015.

113. *United States v. Mohammed Hamzah Khan*, Plea Agreement (2015).

114. Reitman, "The Children of ISIS."

115. *Ibid.*

116. *United States v. Mohammed Hamzah Khan*, Plea Agreement.

117. Kevin Sullivan, "Three American teens, recruited online, are caught trying to join the Islamic State," *Washington Post*, December 8, 2014.

118. Ellie Hall, "Inside the Online World of Three American Teens Who Allegedly Wanted To Join ISIS," *Buzzfeed News*, October 27, 2014.

119. *Ibid.*

120. Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office, Offense Report, October 21, 2014.

121. *Ibid.*

122. *Ibid.*

contacted authorities, believing their daughters to be en route to Syria via Turkey.¹²³ The FBI subsequently placed a notice on their passports and German authorities apprehended the three teenagers before they boarded a flight to Turkey.¹²⁴

Evidence suggests that the three teenagers considered traveling to Syria for some time, with at least one of the teenagers plotting for months.¹²⁵ They exhibited clear signs of radicalization on social media in the year preceding their trip, which perhaps led to Mr. Farah's quick judgment that they had left for Syria.¹²⁶ The teens revealed their increasing frustration with life in the United States and shared pro-IS content, using *kunyas* such as @UmmSuleiman_, @_UmmSufyan, and @_UmmYassir, on Twitter and Tumblr.¹²⁷ Their social media communication did not fall on deaf ears, however, as Islamic State recruiters returned their interest. With over 9,000 exchanged messages, IS fighters built relationships with the teens and reportedly acted as facilitators, providing crucial information on how to arrive safely in Syria.¹²⁸ After being detained and returned to the United States, the teens were interviewed by law enforcement then released back to their families.¹²⁹ At this time, authorities have not filed

charges due to their ages, treating the teens as victims of online predators.¹³⁰

In late November 2014, **Hoda Muthana** allegedly left Hoover, Alabama for IS-held territory.¹³¹ On December 1, 2014, under the *kunya* Umm Jihad, the woman tweeted a photo of four passports, including one from the U.S., with the caption, "Bonfire soon, no need for these anymore."¹³² Although her current whereabouts remain unconfirmed, evidence suggests that Muthana lived with a specific cluster of Australians in Raqqa.¹³³ In a series of tweets she asserted, "Who knew my fate would be living among a bunch of Australians, full on m8. Love my Aussie family" and "there are sooo many Aussies and Brits here but where are all the Americans, wake up u cowards."¹³⁴ On January 7, 2015, shortly after the attack on Charlie Hebdo, the account praised the shooters by stating, "Hats off to the mujs in paris" followed by a tweet encouraging others to conduct similar attacks and "follow in their footsteps" if they cannot travel to IS-held territory.¹³⁵

On January 23, 2015, **Shannon Conley** was sentenced to four years in prison, followed by three years of supervised release, for attempting to join IS.¹³⁶ Law enforcement approached the Colorado teen after staff

123. Ben Brumfield, "Officials: 3 Denver girls played hooky from school and tried to join ISIS," *CNN*, October 22, 2014.

124. Ibid.

125. Ibid.

126. Jesse Paul, "Analyst group: Colorado teens spoke with top Islamic State terrorist," *Denver Post*, October 29, 2014.

127. Hall, "Inside The Online World."

128. Dina Temple-Raston, "ISIS Used Predatory Tools And Tactics To Convince U.S. Teens To Join," *NPR News*, December 11, 2014.

129. Ibid.

130. Ibid.

131. Ellie Hall, "Gone Girl: An Interview With An American In ISIS," *Buzzfeed*, April 17, 2015.

132. Screenshot from Ellie Hall, "Gone Girl."

133. A report on gender and the ISIS phenomenon identifies Tara Nettleton, Zaynab Sharrouf, and Zehra Duman as members of the cluster. Saltman and Smith, "'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part,'" Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (ISD) and *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*, (ICSR), (2015): 70.

134. Archived Example: Umm Jihad @ZumarulJannah, January 7, 2015, 2015.

135. Ibid.

136. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Arvada Woman Sentenced for Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to a Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization," January 23, 2015.



Screenshots of content posted by Hoda Muthanna. Archived examples: Umm Jihad @ZumarulJannah, January 7, 2015.

at the Faith Bible Chapel reported her for suspicious behavior.¹³⁷ In a consensual interview related to the incident, police detectives uncovered her interest in violent extremism.¹³⁸ In subsequent conversations, Conley said she joined the U.S. Army Explorers to learn military tactics and familiarize herself with firearms.¹³⁹ Moreover, she “intended to use that training to go overseas to wage Jihad” and “train Islamic Jihadi fighters in US military tactics.”¹⁴⁰ In the event she was prohibited from fighting, Conley planned to “use her medical training to aid Jihadi fighters.”¹⁴¹ Conley’s father told officials that she met a suitor online, a Tunisian man who claimed to be a fighter in Syria; together, the couple planned Conley’s travel to Syria so they could marry and settle in IS-controlled territory.¹⁴² FBI personnel contacted the Conley family and persuaded them to confront their daughter about her violent ambitions.¹⁴³ The combined efforts of law enforcement and Conley’s family did not dissuade the woman: on April 8, 2014, Conley was arrested while attempting to board a flight to Germany, from which she had planned to continue to Turkey.¹⁴⁴

On April 3, 2015, authorities arrested **Keonna Thomas** in Philadelphia, PA, for attempting to provide material support by traveling to IS-held territory.¹⁴⁵ Prior to her arrest, Thomas used various online platforms, including Twitter, to disseminate propaganda and express her support for the organization’s aims.¹⁴⁶ In private communications with three separate co-conspirators, Thomas articulated her desire to travel to the region and her interest in being martyred.¹⁴⁷

137. *United States v. Shannon Maureen Conley*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit (2014).

138. Ibid.

139. Ibid.

140. Ibid.

141. Ibid.

142. Ibid.

143. Ibid.

144. Ibid.

145. Ibid.

146. Ibid.

147. Ibid.

Based on evidence from legal documents and supported by new reports, Thomas's contacts included Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan ("Miski"), Abu Khalid al-Amriki, and Sheikh Abdullah Faisal.¹⁴⁸ In late March 2015, Thomas researched bus routes between Barcelona and Turkey, the latter of which is a common thoroughfare for persons traveling to IS-controlled territory. Shortly thereafter, Thomas purchased tickets to fly from Philadelphia to Barcelona.¹⁴⁹ In September 2016, Thomas pleaded guilty to trying to join IS and awaits sentencing.¹⁵⁰

Between May and August 2015, **Jaelyn Delshaun Young** and Muhammad Oda Dakhlalla, a couple from Mississippi, planned to travel to IS-held territory and communicated step-by-step details online with two undercover FBI employees.¹⁵¹ In one interaction, Young noted that she and Dakhlalla would have their *nikkah* (an Islamic marriage) so they could travel together without an escort.¹⁵² Young also told a second undercover FBI employee that the duo would travel to IS-held territory under the guise of "newlyweds" on a "honeymoon."¹⁵³ Young wanted to provide medical aid and embraced her future role as a wife, community member, and mother in IS-held territory. In one conversation, she explained, "I cannot wait" to be "amongst my brothers and sisters under the protections of Allah" and "raise little Dawlah [state]

cubs."¹⁵⁴ After obtaining passports, the duo purchased tickets to Istanbul, Turkey, with a connection in the Netherlands. On August 8, 2015, officials arrested Young and Dakhlalla at Mississippi's Golden Triangle Regional Airport after they confessed to their attempt to join IS.¹⁵⁵ Legal documents revealed that Dakhlalla and Young "left behind incriminating farewell letters" acknowledging Young's "role as the planner of the expedition."¹⁵⁶ On August 11, 2016, a judge sentenced Young to 12 years in prison followed by 15 years of probation.¹⁵⁷ Federal prosecutor Clay Joiner said that Young acknowledged that she lied to federal agents and "encouraged Dakhlalla in prison letters to lie and remain true to a radical vision of Islam."¹⁵⁸ During her sentencing, Young expressed guilt and humiliation for how her actions impacted others,¹⁵⁹ but her current stance on jihadi ideology is unknown.

Rather than advancing efforts in America, women in the **traveler** category migrate in order to participate in jihadist groups abroad. Women who successfully travel abroad absorb various roles. Typical activities include supporting jihadi husbands, raising the next generation, disseminating propaganda, and providing medical care. Most women do not pursue or assume violent roles, but there are exceptions. While some travelers migrate alone, others travel in pairs and small clusters with romantic partners, siblings, and friends.

148. Mark Hosenball, Alistair Bell, and Horace Helps, "American charged with Islamic State ties contacted Jamaica cleric: U.S. official," *Reuters*, April 30, 2015. See also, Austin Nolen, "Name of Alleged Co-Conspirators in Philly ISIL Case Revealed," *The Declaration*, June 10, 2016.

149. *United States v. Keonna Thomas*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit (2015).

150. "Philly Woman Pleads Guilty to Trying to Join ISIS," *NBC News 10*, September 21, 2016.

151. *United States v. Jaelyn Delshaun Young and Muhammad Oda Dakhlalla*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit (2015).

152. *Ibid.*

153. *Ibid.*

154. *Ibid.*

155. *Ibid.*

156. *United States v. Muhammad Oda Dakhlalla*, Factual Basis (2016).

157. Jeff Amy, "Mississippi woman gets 12-year sentence on terrorism charge," *Associated Press*, August 11, 2016.

158. *Ibid.*

159. *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Almost a year after the attack in San Bernardino, American women continue to advance jihadi efforts in the U.S. and abroad. Though female sympathizers are not the most prominent or visible proponents of jihadi ideology, evidence suggests that the threat they pose is evolving. This report captures the dynamics of this issue within a framework that sorts women's contributions, both aspirational and achieved, into three overlapping categories: **Plotters**, **Supporters**, and **Travelers**.

While **plotters** design or carry out domestic attacks, **supporters** garner material support within U.S. borders, disseminate propaganda, or conceal information about impending threats to advance the agenda of jihadist groups. **Travelers** migrate to participate in the movement directly. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and this framework intends to shed light on a rising demographic of committed jihadists in America.

Despite the natural inclination to triage the issue and assign levels of severity to the three different categories, doing so would be counterproductive given that women can contribute to jihadi efforts without ever perpetrating violence. Travelers, who rarely engage in violence, advance the cause by disseminating propaganda, inciting attacks, and sustaining the movement as supportive wives and mothers to the next generation jihadists. Similarly, efforts by supporters in the U.S., though indirect, may have grave consequences that are not immediately apparent. For example, financial transfers amounting to \$3,000 may seem unremarkable, but the purchasing power of the dollar in countries such as Pakistan, Syria, Kenya, or Somalia could make the donation quite considerable.

The cases offer a tremendous diversity of demographic data, suggesting that an overarching profile of the American female jihadist is indiscernible. Women

in the dataset choose affiliations from a range of organizations such as IS, al-Shabaab, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda. While a few appear to act alone, many conduct activities in pairs, trios, and clusters. Much like contemporary radicalization and recruitment trends, online and offline dynamics complement one another, and remain influential among jihadi women in America. Social media platforms are an especially common medium through which women are active, highlighting a vital opportunity space for online detection and disruption. Anecdotal evidence supports the claim that "women have no fewer motives than men for engaging in jihad"¹⁶⁰ but the drivers behind women's engagement require further exploration in subsequent research.

Literature addressing the role of women in countering violent extremism (CVE) is expanding, with a new body of research demanding women-centric and gender-related programming. Women victimized by violent extremism can voice compelling narratives to counter the allure of the movement. Women who renounce their support for jihadi groups may offer potent perspectives that inform the public and deter individuals on the path to extremism.

These findings do not chart a clear path forward, but the efforts of jihadi women in America must be met with a varied response. The diverse backgrounds of these cases render monolithic approaches ineffective. While the vigilance of law enforcement is vital, the legal system alone is not equipped to deal with all female sympathizers, particularly in instances where women engage with the ideology without breaking any laws. Though legal redress is the primary means to mitigate the threat, complementary strategies that offer alternatives to arrest, explore de-radicalization, and emphasize prevention are necessary steps to counter violent extremism by women.

160. Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38 (2015): 497.

THIS PAPER DRAWS ON
25 CASES IN ORDER TO CONDUCT
A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF
THE MOST RECENT WAVE OF
JIHADIST-RELATED ACTIVITY
PERPETRATED BY
WOMEN IN AMERICA.

Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

2000 Pennsylvania Avenue · Washington D.C., 20052
cchs.gwu.edu/program-extremism · @gwupoe