

# **RADICALIZATION OF MALAYSIAN WOMEN IN ISIS: PROFILING, CAUSES AND ROLES**

Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan  
School of International Studies  
Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia.  
([atiyah@uum.edu.my](mailto:atiyah@uum.edu.my))

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.22452/jati.sp2018no1.8>

## **Abstract**

Women appear to be very significant in the survival of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It is due to their roles in procreating the militants, recruiting, and even in combating. Various studies and reports have shown that, although the ISIS subscribes to the idea that women should be confined to homes with their husbands and children, women's roles are increasingly significant and crucial especially in the post establishment of the Caliphate, with <sup>Raqqqa</sup>, Syria, as the Capital City. Even though the Caliphate had fallen in 2017, women continue to be a force to be reckoned with. Prior to the fall of Raqqqa, reports have shown that over 500 western women have travelled to for various roles. In the context of Malaysia, the entire nation was shocked to learn that there are Malaysian Muslim women were involved in ISIS in 2013 and the numbers had grown until recently. At present, more than 30 women to have been involved in ISIS- some have been detained, some released and few were not located. Interestingly, these women come from diverse demography in terms of age, educational level, economic and social background. Their involvement in ISIS is also believed to be motivated by various factors including jihadism and marriage. This article focuses on the profiling of the Malaysian women who were involved in ISIS and the causes for their radicalization and roles they played in ISIS. The data gathered are primarily from various reports and expert interviews which involved with female ISIS detainees.

*Keywords: radicalization, ISIS, women, terrorism, Malaysia*

## Introduction

“In Islam, men and women are different, but, jihad is mandatory for all Muslims, just like praying. Everyone must do jihad”, uttered Dian Yulia Dovi, the first Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) female suicide bomber in the South East Asia region. She is 27 years old Indonesian. She was packed with explosives which she planned to detonate at Indonesia’s presidential palace, but the plan failed. She was arrested on the 10 December 2016. She was determined to die as a martyr for global jihad. Dian was a migrant worker in Taiwan and was radicalized online while she was abroad. She said to the media while in police custody that “on Facebook, I opened profiles of jihadists, who had inspired me. I did not join any group, just looked through, but became more curious.” She added that she collected articles and audio clips of religious teachings on the Internet. She was radicalized just by watching the youtube video on ISIS fighters (Soeriaatmadja, 2017). In the mid of last year (2018), three families conducted suicide bombings in three different places at different times in Indonesia, and all took their children together. In one of the reports, it was revealed that they were radicalized after watching a video of ISIS in Syria and Iraq (*The Guardian*, 2018). Other Indonesian women were reported to be influenced by their husbands, families, and peers, online or offline (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict [IPAC], 2017).

**Table 1. Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq**

Countries	Official Count	Non-Official	Returnees
Cambodia	1		
Indonesia	700	500	162
Malaysia	100		5+
Philippines	100		
Singapore	2		

Source: The Soufan Group (2015, pp. 7-10).

The report by The Soufan Group (TSG) in 2015, revealed that the numbers of foreign fighters travelling to so-called Islamic State (IS) constituted approximately 27, 995 persons from 66 countries in 7 regions. It covers the Western Europe (5,000), Former Soviet Republics (4,700), North America (280), The Balkans (875), The Maghreb (8,000), The Middle East (8,240) and Southeast Asia (900). TSG has admitted that the difficulty to get the accurate numbers was because the governments themselves did not release the official numbers of their

citizens who have gone to Syria and Iraq. Even if they do, there is no breakdown according to the age or sex, the returnees or those who died (The Soufan Group, 2015, p. 5). The data, however, was not provided according to the sex group. Hence, the number of female fighters from each region to Syria and Iraq is unknown.

## **Women and Terrorism**

Women involvement in terrorism and terrorist organizations as noted by Gentry and Sjoberg “not a phenomenon exclusive to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Nor it is limited to Islamist terrorist groups” (2011, p. 58). They have documented various terrorist organization that women are affiliated with, which include the Russian nihilist organization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Socialist Revolutionary Party in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Shining Path group in Peru, Tamil Tigers of Eelam Sri Lanka, Kurdistan Workers Party in Turkey, Hamas (Palestine), Zapatista (Mexico), Abu Sayyaf (Philippines), the Taliban (Afghanistan), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (Colombia), the Red Brigade (Italy), Front Line (Prima Linea in Italy) and the Weather Underground (United States).

Hence, it can be seen that throughout history, women have participated in violent uprisings, performing strategic, supportive and even combat roles in a wide range of violent movements (Ness, 2005 ). In a recent development, the Boko Haram insurgents have also used women as suicide bombers (Anyebe, 2014). Similarly, in ISIS, there were women reported to have been engaged as suicide bombers (Soeriaatmadja, 2017), and involved in combat related activities (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict [IPAC], 2017, pp. 10-11).

Earlier, women were seen to play much less violent or combative roles in militant and terrorist organizations. However, recent development has shown that women have become active in these organizations. They do not only perform traditional roles associated with a woman but have turned as kidnappers, hijackers and martyrs. They “have grown substantially and have become a matter of public attention and record across the globe” (Sjoberg, Cooke, & Neal, 2011, pp. 2, 116).

The Institute of Strategic Dialogue estimated that there are approximately 550 women were travelled to Syria and Iraq. They revealed that among these women, 56% are married, with most to foreign fighters with similar nationality or at least, in terms of the linguistic background. 30% of them are widowed and have increased significantly in the last six months. At least 13% of them have children. Their ages range from as young as 14 to 46 years old, with the majority group between 15 to 25 years old. The Institute also discovered that, while many

women from the Middle East travelled with husbands and families, the majority of women from the West, have gone as single women, often in pairs or small groups. They have a diverse background in terms of educational level, ethnicity and family background (Havlicek, 2015, pp. 4-5). However, it is believed that the number is increasing taking into consideration the aggressive propaganda through social media which has lured many girls and women to migrate to the Caliphate as well as to support in any way possible to ensure the continuity and triumph of the Caliphate.

In the context of South East Asian (SEA) region, there is evidence that women from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore have been involved in ISIS whether in their respective countries or Syria and Iraq. They have played various crucial roles and have a diverse background like their female western counterparts. Ever since the Caliphate was declared in June 2014, ISIS has developed a unique strategy that immediately recognized the importance of bringing women more actively into propaganda and recruitment efforts. Declaring a Caliphate means efforts need to be done for a state-building. To ensure its continuity to the next generation, ISIS has increased its female-focused efforts, which include writing treatise directly for women- which is prepared by al-Khansaa Brigade. ISIS also allows women to have voices within their capacity - recruiting via social media and even propagandizing. They call other women to join their causes. Women also are valued, not as sexual objects, but as mothers to the next generation and guardians of the ISIS ideology. Even though the Caliphate was defeated last year, ISIS's influence and operations continue to be a threat to countries worldwide.

There is evidence that showed that ISIS valued its women members over its men. For example, in the Jordanian hostage crisis in January 2015, ISIS had requested to exchange a Jordanian pilot named Moaz al-Kasabeh, with Sajida al-Rishawi. She was held in an Iraqi prison in Jordan due to her participation in the deadly attack in Amman in 2015. Her suicide bombing mission failed, but her husband's suicide bomb was successfully detonated. ISIS controlled radio called Sajida (Havlicek, 2015, pp. 9-10). The ISIS's action showed a very strong message that they valued its women members. However, it is still unclear, whether ISIS wanted to "use" her in the next suicide missions or to be part of ISIS decision-making machinery.

## **Theory of Radicalization**

Stahelski (2004) explains that terrorists are not born, but are made. Many factors contribute to one's radicalization. It is necessary first to understand what is meant by radicalization.

Tinka Veldhuis and Jørgen Staun (2009, p. 4) have stated that there are no clear and universally accepted definitions of radicalization. However, both of them explain that radicalization can be seen from violent and non-violent perspectives. They state:

Definitions of radicalisation most often centre around two different foci: (1) on violent radicalisation, where the emphasis is put on the active pursuit or acceptance of the use of violence to attain the stated goal, and (2) on a broader sense of radicalisation, where the emphasis is placed on the active pursuit or acceptance of far reaching changes in society, which may or may not constitute a danger to democracy and may or may not involve the threat of or use of violence to attain the stated goals.

In general, radicalization is a process of involving either an individual or group whereby they are indoctrinated to a set of beliefs supporting the acts of terrorism. This can be manifested in one's behaviour and attitudes. Although radicalism does not equate to terrorism, radicalism normally precedes terrorism. However, some who commit terrorism may bypass radicalization (Rahimullah, Larmar, & Abdalla, 2013).

In the context of women terrorism, Galvin (1983) has explained extensively about male and female terrorists, who are different as they are varied in socio-psychological background. These differences can be seen through their connections, motives, objectives and life-styles. The differences between them too are definite and observable. Individual personalities and group dynamics shape the roles (be it assumed, assigned or enforced) and functions of the female terrorist. According to Galvin, women take up terrorism on their initiatives because it seems to accord with their interests or are inducted into it by another, most usually males. A common motivating factor is normally through political involvement and belief in a cause, for example, an intense frustration is a strong motivator. The other factors include attempts to change socio-political situations by conventionally acceptable means fail or have occasioned death, injury or imprisonment of loved ones, women (as well as men) have turned to terrorism as a last resort. The desire for revenge or even just to be heard has proved a

powerful stimulant especially in the case of highly politicized women despairing of securing change by any means. However, the exact reasons why individuals become terrorists can only be appreciated on a case-by-case basis. It is not particularly helpful to generalize in this area. Some motives are personal, while in other cases individual interests are set aside.

Christine Sixta (2008) argued that, although some scholars stated that women were pushed into terrorism by men (see also Chesler, 2004; Victor, 2003), Groskop (2004) states that women opted for terrorism out of their choices. They are more willing participants in terrorism, rather than being forced, pulled or pushed into terrorism. Sixta (2008, p. 274) also cited Lisa Kruger who states that “to be ready for the increasing threat of women terrorist, we must recognize women as rational actors as opposed to emotional reactors of violence”. Sixta also explains that most women who involved in terrorism chose terrorism as a means of political participation, and as a way to fight for the betterment of their gender. By using violence to accomplish equality, female terrorists have become militant feminists.

Terrorism is also an avenue for the frustrated women who watched and experienced too much loss in the conflicts. Many of them were pulled into the fight because they wanted to be useful and found a means to participate. Terrorism is inherently violent political activism (Sixta, 2008, p. 275). Those who engaged in suicide bombings were socially acceptable way to financially contribute to their families income. Female suicide bombers are likely to receive a high sum of money upon completion of the missions and it will be given to their family. They too will be recognized as heroines in their community and becoming idols for children and adults (Sixta, 2008, p. 276).

Hence, it can be seen that, what causes women to be radicalized, may not be so different from men. For instance, the former might feel angry or frustrated over the treatment of Muslims in their areas or around the globe, or their families and friends being killed or as a last resort to make political and social changes. However, there could be a slight difference when it comes to recognition and entitlement for women as “entity” within the organization, the community or the state. The radicalization and terrorism between men and women, hence, detach at this juncture. When the latter wanted to accomplish the goal of social, economic and political equality via violent means, then, the latter becomes “female terrorists” or militant feminists. It can be seen through the narration of several female terrorists as well as some media coverage reported about it.

Karla Ramirez’s narration, a female terrorist from El Salvador in the ELN who stated:

A woman can become a leader the same as a man, and do everything a man can do. We hold the same desire in our hearts. We only want to have justice and liberty. I think the feeling I have is the same feeling that many women have, and if they have my feeling, then they should go ahead and not be afraid to die to change things. (Jones, 1997, p. 102)

Amandeep Kaur, a female Sikh terrorist, revealed that she had face a difficulty to join the Sikh militant movement due to her gender. However, as time progressed, she gained her confidence and “capable of taking any risk, that nothing could scare or deter Sikh women” (Mahmood, 1996, p. 214, cited in Sixta, 2008, p. 275).

After Wafa, a Palestinian woman who became the first female Palestinian suicide bomber on January 27, 2002, killing one Israeli civilian and wounding approximately 140 others (MEMRI [The Middle East Media Research Institute], 2002), a newspaper columnist in Jordan wrote:

The Arab woman has taken her place and her dignity. It is the women’s rights activists in the West who robbed women of their right to be human, and viewed them as bodies without souls...Wasn’t it the West that kept demanding that Eastern women become equal to man? Well, this is how we understand equality- this is how the martyr Wafa understood equality. (Bloom, 2005, p, 5, cited in Sixta, 2008, p.273)

Hence, it can be argued that radicalization factors to men and women might not be that different. However, both differed when the latter acted or called for women to be recognized as an entity.

### **Women in ISIS in Malaysia**

Reports have shown that there are women from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines who are involved directly in ISIS or terrorist groups affiliated to ISIS, either in their own countries, neighbouring SEA countries or in the Caliphate. The women in the region have played various roles from the traditional until the radical one.

In the subsequent sections, the paper aims to see the identity and causes of the women involved in ISIS in Malaysia as well as what roles they played and their impacts in the country.

The involvement of women in ISIS in this country was spotted in 2013 when it was reported in the media. It was reported that there were three

Malaysian women who travelled to the Middle East to marry the jihadists. The women were in their 30s and 40s (Al-Arabiya News, 2014). In 2014, it was reported that the duo - a housewife and a widow were arrested in Malaysia for recruiting Malaysian undergraduate for ISIS. It was reported that normally recruitment was carried out by the men, but now women are also taking that role due to their maternal instincts. This has made them effective recruiters (*The Straits Times*, 2014). In May 2017, it was reported that 20 Malaysian women were stranded in Turkey trying to cross to Syria and Iraq to marry the jihadis lovers. Counter Terrorism Division principal assistant director Datuk Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay told the press that the women had sold their houses and cars and used bank loans to finance their trips to Syria via Turkey. "When they arrived in Istanbul, they and other foreigners, including Indonesians, were taken by minders to a halfway house. They surrendered their passports and mobile phones to these minders to avoid being detected," Ayob was quoted as saying. However, due to their overstay in Turkey, they were deported and sent back to Malaysia (*The Sun Daily Online*, 2017, p. 1)

Various newspaper reports are exposing several Malaysian women being caught while trying to go to the Caliphate. For instance, in October 2014, Ummi Khalsom Bahok, a 25 years old Assistant Credit Control officer, was arrested at the KL International Airport. She was planning to go to Turkey via Brunei to marry an ISIS member, Aqif Husin Rahaiza. She confessed that being a wife to a jihadi is the tremendous blessing a wife can get (*Berita Harian Online*, 2014). In the same year, a university student majoring in Islamic study (Quran and Sunnah), Syamimi Faiqah Sulaiman, 24 years old, who discontinued her studies due to poor academic performance, had claimed to be already to go to Syria. She had a public online diary which revealed that she was motivated and had the intention to join IS (*Selangor Kini*, 2014). A 27 years old female university drop out was also arrested at KL International Airport in 2015 while she was checking in to Istanbul. She was already married to a Moroccan IS fighter via Skype and wanted to unite with her husband there (*The Straits Time*, 2015). In 2016, a 36 years old unemployed single mother, Nor Izatul Farahirah Ismail, was arrested due to the possession of a militant-styled black headband with the words "Lailahaillah Muhammadarrasullah" and "Allah Rasul Muhammad" written on it. These items are believed to be related to ISIS (Khairah N. Karim, 2016). Zilah Tajuddin, a 43 years old bodyguard, was charged by the court for supporting ISIS militancy. She downloaded and encouraged IS activities via Telegram (Kumpulan Tauhid State) (*Berita Harian Online*, 2016). Most of the women were arrested and detained before they left the country except two that is, Dr. Sham, the ISIS stardom, and Syamimi whose whereabouts is unknown.

Dr Shams appears to attract international media attention due to her posts in various social media channels like Facebook, Tumblr and Telegram, and also due to her profession, a medical doctor. Dr Shams is a medical doctor who migrated to Syria without the knowledge of her parents. She was single when she arrived in Syria, but after that, she married Moroccan jihadis, named Abu Barra. From her post, it is known that her husband was killed in the war and she has a son. She still operates as a medical professional for ISIS, specializing in the primary health care for women and children. It was reported that ISIS is pleased with her performances and has rewarded her with essential medical equipment including broad-spectrum antibiotics and a pressure monitor (Saltman & Smith, 2015). Dr. Shams via her Tumblr blog "Diary of a Muhajirah" who referred to herself as "the Bird of Jannah". She narrated her experience with ISIS, encourages and directs other women to do likewise. Dr Shams said that she was compelled to go to Syria to help the jihadists there due to her medical expertise. She said on Twitter "stethoscope around my neck and *Kalash* on my shoulder. Martyrdom is my highest dream" (Palansamy, 2014, p. 1). She also posted in her blogs that she provides check-ups to pregnant women and multiple vaccinations to children. The blog has been a great public relations blessing to ISIS, but at the same time, has shown that women have expanding roles within the Islamic State (Spencer, 2016, p. 95). In one of her postings on Twitter, Dr. Shams wrote: "A life without jihad is like drinking sea water. It keeps you thirsty & causes you dehydrated [sic]. That is the condition of our *Ummah* [international Muslim community] today" (Hall, 2014).

The latest information received is Dr. Shams is still in Raqqa with a son, serving the community without a salary and her aim is only for the hereafter. Last year, after *eidul fitri*, the areas of her house was bombed and that was the last communication of her with her families in Malaysia (Personal communication with an ISIS interrogator, 10 October 2017).

The most recent case reported in Malaysia was a woman who led an all-women terror cell, planned to attack a polling centre in Puchong, Selangor, during the 14<sup>th</sup> General Election last year. However, she was successfully detained by the police (*The Straits Times*, 2018).

It can be seen that many Malaysian women, from different age groups, background and marital status have become radicalized and joined ISIS. Very few have succeeded migrating to Syria, but many more have been successfully detained by the Malaysian government under various counter-terrorism acts such as Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (POTA), Security Offences (Special Measure) Act 2012 (SOSMA) and National Security Council Act (NSC) 2016. Perhaps, it can be seen that women in Malaysia who are involved in ISIS have no

family member involved in terrorism or Islamic militant activities. However, they have become radicalized, in many ways including socialization with friends and teachers. They also believe that they can purify their previous sinful life by choosing radicalized life.

In the context of Southeast Asia, reports have shown that women from Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia have been involved in ISIS in varying degrees. Of all four countries, reports have shown that women in Indonesia have participated in ISIS as suicide bombers (Soeriatmadja, 2017; Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict [IPAC], 2017), recruiters and propagandists (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict [IPAC], 2017), sympathizer (Arianti & Yasin, 2016) and funders (Kneip, 2014). In the Philippines, there is evidence that there are women active in recruiting and caring for the wounded fighters involved in ISIS. Farhana Maute, the mother of Maute brothers, was active in recruiting and care for the wounded (Fonbuena, 2017; Smith, 2017). There were few women involved as medical staff, funders and sympathizers (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict [IPAC], 2017). As for Singapore, one woman was detained because of posting and sharing pro-ISIS material online. She had planned to travel to Syria with her young child before being detained in 2016 (Berlinger, 2017).

Thus, it can be seen that Malaysian women who were involved in ISIS, migrated or attempted to migrate to Syria to become the jihadists wives. Initially, they were less militant as compared to their Indonesian and Philippine counterparts. However, the recent attempt to attack a polling station during the recent GE14 has raised some serious concern from the Malaysian authority. Most of the Malaysian women were radicalized through friends, at school or college, as well as the social media. While some of the Indonesian women were radicalized through the same channels as the Malaysian women, however, it can be said that many of them radicalized because of their family members are involved in ISIS or groups that are affiliated to ISIS.

## **Research Methodology**

The methods used in this study are a library and archival research. It includes various books, journal articles and news paper reports on related issues. In depth interviews also conducted with one of the ISIS interrogators of Bukit Aman Counter- Terrorism Unit. This study experienced an access limitation to reach the respondents as the latter are placed under tight security. Hence, the data only can be gathered via secondary resources, which is through the person who had

interrogated the female ISIS detainees and handled the deradicalization programmes.

## **Discussion**

It can be observed that, of all countries in Southeast Asia, four countries reported to have women involved in ISIS, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. Of all, women in Indonesia appear to be the most active and radical, followed by the Philippines, Malaysia, and lastly Singapore. The first female suicide bomber was an Indonesian. However, not one but two of them and both attempts failed. The recent events showed that three families including women and children had committed successful suicide bombings at three different places in Indonesia. As for the Malaysians, from the newspaper reports, it is revealed that the majority of them are motivated to migrate to the Caliphate to marry the jihadist. Very few are active recruiters. However, recent development has shown that there was a woman who attempted to attack a polling station in the recent 14<sup>th</sup> general election. Another Malaysian female, Dr Sham, has stood out at the international level gaining international media attention and has become the pride of ISIS. She still serves as a medical doctor in Syria until today.

All of these women have a different background including age, educational background, social and economic status. Many Malaysian women who get involved in ISIS are not associated with militancy families. The reasons for their radicalization differed and sometimes reported in the newspaper that many of them wanted to seek the blessing from Allah SWT by marrying the jihadis or to cleanse themselves of their previous sins. It also can be observed elsewhere that some women have other motivations to join ISIS, for instance, as a form of emancipation. This can be seen through the social media where the women take the lead- they recruit, propagate and raise funds, without men's permission or order. They decide and determine their direction and embrace other women under the spirit of sisterhood. All of this has given a sense of authority and independency for the women, at the same time, a sense of worthiness and belonging (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict [IPAC], 2017). This observation is also consistent with some of Eric Mietz's observation of female recruitment into ISIS in the Western Balkans. He found that there are several pull factors for female migration to the Islamic State, to create a new state, romanticism for marrying a jihadist, sisterhood belonging, jihadi "cool" subculture, seek revenge against the "unbelievers", practise "pure" Islamic freely and it is a "religious duty" to migrate to Islamic State (2016, p. 10).

Since women are equally exposed and susceptible to ISIS propaganda and participate in jihad, something should be done to rectify this. It should be a primary concern of all governments since at present, ISIS in particular, and the leaders of pro-ISIS militant groups in this region, have called the women to be the front liners in jihad, especially in the post Caliphate in this region. This call is a strong push factor for radicalized women to engage in violent actions including suicide bombings. With the advancement of technology, it provides international interactive, fast and safe platforms which can be used for radicalization and recruitment. This would put women more vulnerable than ever before. Although ISIS prescribed that women's primary roles at homes and need to seek permission if wanting to leave the house, the women actually enjoy liberation online. The CEO of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Sarah Havlicek mentions that:

The reality seems to contradict in their online activist roles, the jihadi girl-power sub culture and the level of aggressive can be traced in their incitement of hatred and violence. To assume they were "naïve" or "ignorant" to ISIS' brutality would be incorrect... (2015, p. 10).

Havlicek suggests using of soft power to counter terrorism, especially relating to radicalization. She pointed that using drone and border measure cannot simply challenge radicalization. The targeted group should be those who support and sympathize ISIS which is growing, not only individuals but also organization such as Al-Qaeda. While presenting this to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, United States (US) House of Representatives, she said " we must work at both the immediate, tactical, hard edge of prevention and deradicalization and at the strategic level to counter the underlying ideology" (2015, p. 14). Havlicek explains that the Institute for Strategic Dialogue has built and run the largest global network comprising former extremists globally, Against Violent Extremism (AVE), collaborating with Google Ideas and the GenNext Foundation. The former extremists' voices are essential to reach the would-be recruits, in a much more convincing way. However, she also pointed out that there is a major gap in counter-narratives and outreach targeting "at risk" girls and women. They need to develop messages that specially targeted female audience (Havlicek, 2015, p. 16). Female practitioners in the counter-terrorism, counter-extremism and de-radicalization spaces will be vital. It is not so much of the issue of equality, but female practitioners will be more able than men, to engage with young females because of "the fundamentalist gender roles solidified within the radicalization process" (Havlicek, 2015, p. 17).

Eric Mietz who researched about understanding the ISIS female recruitment in the Western Balkan has raised that

There is no gender perspective is being included in current counterterrorism or counter violent extremism (CVE) efforts. Western Balkan governments only have enacted legislation to criminalize participation in, material support of or recruitment for foreign paramilitary groups and there is an absence of action to establish a programme to de-radicalize or to rehabilitate women. (2016, p. 5)

It can be seen that there is a gap in gender approach in counterterrorism or de-radicalization, and perhaps, contribute to one of the reasons contributing to the continuous of female migration to the Caliphate and female radicalization in ISIS. Therefore, there is a need to have an approach for balancing extreme ideology of ISIS as well as incorporating female perspectives in counterterrorism. The subsequent section deals with the strategies to counter-female terrorism and radicalization.

### **Female counter-narratives**

It is clearly stated earlier that, there is a lack of approach or measures that concerns females who are radicalized or become terrorists. The measures so far, are gender-blind. These have been confirmed by several key persons dealing with terrorism particularly in counter-terrorism that there is a need to incorporate females or female perspectives, so that, female radicalization can be intercepted. It is more important when looking at Malaysia scenario where women are radicalized with the ideas to become the wives of the jihadis and to cleanse major sins. They opted for this radicalized ways by joining ISIS to win the blessing from Allah SWT. The counter-terrorism in Malaysia should target this two construction.

At present, the counter-narrative approach seems to be effective since it provides the true picture of ISIS to the world audience including the prospective recruits. It can be seen that, for example, the International Center for Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), which uses this approach, seems to be effective to invoke the feeling like “this is not Islam”, “ISIS is wrong”, “ISIS is evil” , “that’s not right”, simultaneously revealing the truth, particularly when the former ISIS shared the inside stories. At the same time, there must be more ISIS female defectors to share their inside stories, so that, it will serve as a lesson for other women not to join ISIS or migrate to Syria or Iraq. The female defectors would

have known how to and what to raise to the global female audience. According to Saltman and Smith (2015, p. 56), the success of counter-narratives aimed at civil society depends heavily on three factors which are, the messenger, the message and the platform the message is distributed through. These three factors need to come together in order to convey the right message to the right audience. Hence, females are needed in this counter-narratives to relate their experiences to other female audiences.

### ***Wassatiyah* Concept**

There must be *wassatiyah* messages in countering terrorism. It means that the substance of the counter-narratives should also be related to the principles and teaching of Islam including Prophet Muhammad's and his Companions' actions. These will be used as a backdrop or to counter against the dealings or action of ISIS. For instance, the example of Prophet Muhammad respecting a Jew in the funeral procession, or how Caliph Umar al-Khattab treated the old poor Jewish man. Caliph Umar met an elderly Jewish man seeking for alms and the Caliph was saddened by that. He asked the old man what had happened and the latter replied that due to his elderly state, he was unable to secure a job to support himself. Caliph Umar took him to Jerusalem and instructed the man to be taken care off. The Caliph said: There is no justice, we collect taxes (jizyah) from them when they are young and leave when they are old" (Suzalie Mohamad, 2010, cited in Mohd. Shukri Hanapi, 2014, p. 58). Hence, by incorporating *wassatiyah* messages in the counter-narratives we will be able to show the true teachings of Islam.

### **Conclusion**

Despite its physical was dismantled, ISIS is still active and expected to be more aggressive in its operation than ever before. It is because, not only are there still a significant number of the jihadis in Syria and Iraq, but many now have returned to their home countries. In addition, governments are also concerned on how to integrate the returned women and children in their home countries. Some of the foreign jihadis, rather than going home, they have chosen to stop elsewhere, including to the South East Asia (SEA) region. It is also unknown whether their actions are within the instructions of the ISIS leaders (Barrett, 2017, p. 12). In addition to the returnees and the foreign fighters, there are already radicalized citizen, known and unknown to the local authorities. These have created a serious concern to many countries, including to those in the SEA region

Many returnees including women and children become security concern to the home countries and transited countries. Malaysia is no exception. Recently, the Malaysian Counter-Terrorism Unit has focused not only on the male returnees but also women and children. The Unit wanted to review their security risks of the returnees (*The Star*, 2018). Attention to women and children was given after series of suicide bombings by families in Indonesia last year. The parents took their children along in the suicide missions (*The Guardian*, 2018).

Hence, actions must be taken to prevent and to contain the radicalization among the public including the women and girls. Female counter-narratives and concept of *wassatiyah* should be embedded into counter-terrorism measures in this country and the region, along with other measures that are taking place. These approaches will work, perhaps, function to fill the gap of counter-terrorism. It might be a long-term process, but the impacts could be greater and permanent.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Universiti Utara Malaysia for the COE Grant which enables me to carry out this study.

### **References**

- Al-Arabiya News. (2014, 28 August). Malaysian women join ISIS to comfort militants. Retrieved from <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/asia/2014/08/28/Report-Malaysian-women-join-ISIS-to-comfort-militants-.html>
- Anyebe, A. A. (2014). An Overview of Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria. *Saudi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(2), 55-61. Retrieved from <http://scholarsmepub.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/SJHSS-1255-61.pdf>
- Arianti, V., & Yasin, N. A. (2016). Women's Proactive Roles in Jihadism in Southeast Asia. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, 8(5), 9-15. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26351417.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ad987bf597f228e9abead6c8a569266e4>

- Barrett, R. (2017). *Beyond The Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*. n.p.: The Soufan Center. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10782>
- Berita Harian Online. (2014, 31 October). Wanita cuba kahwin anggota kumpulan IS didakwa. Retrieved from <http://www.bharian.com.my/node/14813>
- Berita Harian Online. (2016, 11 August). Bekas pengawal keselamatan dituduh sokong IS. Retrieved from <http://www2.bharian.com.my/node/182011>
- Berlinger, J. (2017, 12 June). Preschool assistant is the 1<sup>st</sup> woman ever detained for radicalization in Singapore. CNN. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/12/asia/singapore-woman-/index.html>
- Bloom, M. (2005). Mother, Daughter, Sister, Bomber. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 61(6), 54-62. Retrieved from [http://www.thebulletin.org/article.php?art\\_ofn=nd05bloom](http://www.thebulletin.org/article.php?art_ofn=nd05bloom)
- Chesler, P. (2004). Forced Female Suicide. *FrontPage Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=11855>
- Fonbuena, C. (2017). MILF, Maute Group battle for legitimacy. Retrieved from <http://www.rappler.com/nation/172523-farhana-maute-marawi-siege>
- Galvin, D. M. (1983). The female terrorist: A Socio-Psychological perspective. *The Behavioral Science & the Law*, 1(2), 19-32
- Gentry, C. E., & Sjoberg, L. (2011). The Gendering of Women's Terrorism. In L. Sjoberg & C. E. Gentry (Eds), *Women, Gender and Terrorism* (pp. 57-82). Atalanta, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Groskop, V. (2004). Chechnya's Deadly "Black Widow". *New Statesmen*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsstatesman.com.200409060023>
- Hall, J. (2014, 22 November). The secret diary of a jihadi bride: Doctor, 26, leaves behind 'middle class life' in Malaysia, travels to join ISIS – and keeps a journal of her time in Syria. *Daily Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2843901/The-secret-diary-jihadi-bride-Doctor-leaves-middle-class-life-Malaysia-travels-join-ISIS-keeps-journal-time-Syria.html>
- Hanapi, M. S. (2014). The *Wasatiyyah* (Moderation) Concept in Islamic Epistemology: A Case Study of its Implementation in Malaysia. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4(9)(1), 51-62. Retrieved from [http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_4\\_No\\_9\\_1\\_July\\_2014/7.pdf](http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_4_No_9_1_July_2014/7.pdf)
- Havlicek, S. (2015). The Islamic State's War on Women and Girls. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), *IPAC Report No. 33*, 1-18.

- Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC). (2017). Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Indonesian Women Extremists. *IPAC Report No. 35*. Retrieved from [http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2017/01/IPAC\\_Report\\_35.pdf](http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2017/01/IPAC_Report_35.pdf)
- Jones, D. E. (1997). *Women Warriors: A History*. Dulles: Brassey's.
- Khairah N. Karim. (2016, 16 June). Women charged with possessing terror-related item. *New Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/06/152297/woman-charged-possessing-terror-related-item>
- Kneip, K. (2014). Female Jihad – Women in the ISIS. *Politikon: IAPSS Political Science Journal*, 29, 88-106. Retrieved from [https://www.iapss.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/88\\_Volume-29.pdf](https://www.iapss.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/88_Volume-29.pdf)
- Mahmood, C. K. (1996). *Fighting for Faith and Nation, Dialogues with Sikh Militants*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- MEMRI (The Middle East Media Research Institute). (2002, 12 February). Wafa Idris: The Celebration of the First Female Palestinian Suicide Bomber - Part I. *Inquiry & Analysis Series*, 83, 1-2. Retrieved from <https://www.memri.org/reports/wafa-idris-celebration-first-female-palestinian-suicide-bomber-part-i>
- Mietz, E. (2016). What About the Women? Understanding and Addressing the Problem of ISIS Female Recruitment in the Western Balkans. Belgrade Center for Security Policy. Retrieved from <http://www.bezbednost.org/All-publications/6260/What-about-the-women-Understanding-and.shtml>
- Mohamad, S. (2010). Elakkan Perpecahan Demi Kepentingan Rakyat dan Negara. Retrieved from [http://www.ikim.gov.my/v5/index.php?lg=1&opt=com\\_article&grp=2&sec=&key=2035&cmd=resetall](http://www.ikim.gov.my/v5/index.php?lg=1&opt=com_article&grp=2&sec=&key=2035&cmd=resetall)
- Ness, C. D. (2005). In the Name of the Cause: Women's Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28(5), 353-373.
- Palansamy, Y. (2014, 22 September). Shocked, Malaysian doctors remind "jihadist" healer in Syria of professional code. Malay Mail Online. Retrieved from <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/print/malaysia/shocked-malaysian-doctors-remind-jihadist-healer-in-syria-of-professionals>
- Rahimullah, R. H., Larmar, S., & Abdalla, M. (2013). Understanding Violent Radicalization among Muslims: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Science*, 1(1), 19-35. Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/143865434.pdf>

- Saltman, E. M., & Smith, M. (2015). *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon*. London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Retrieved from [http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/02/Till\\_Martyrdom\\_Do\\_Us\\_Part\\_Gender\\_and\\_the\\_ISIS\\_Phenomenon.pdf](http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/02/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf)
- Sixta, C. (2008). The Illusive Third Wave: Are Female Terrorists the New “New Women” in Developing Societies? *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 29(2), 261-288.
- Sjoberg, L., Cooke, G. D., & Neal, S. R. (2011). Introduction: Women, Gender and Terrorism. In L. Sjoberg & C. E. Gentry (Eds.), *Women, Gender and Terrorism* (pp. 1-28). Atalanta, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Smith, N. (2017, 26 June). Philippine matriarch Farhana Maute alleged kingpin in Isis assault. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <https://www.stuff.co.nz/world/asia/94109123/philippine-matriarch-farhana-maute-alleged-kingpin-in-isis-assault>
- Spencer, A. N. (2016). The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 9(3), 74-98. Retrieved from <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol9/iss3/6>
- Selangor Kini. (2014, 13 October). ISIS: failure to achieve minimum examination grade, Syamimi discontinued by KUIS since 2013. Retrieved from <https://selangorkini.my/en/2014/10/isis-failure-to-achieve-minimum-examination-grade-syamimi-discontinued-by-kuis-since-2013/>
- Soeriaatmadja, W. (2017, 29 August). Jail for Indonesian woman who planned suicide strike. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/jail-for-indonesian-woman-who-planned-suicide-strike>
- Stahelski, A. (2004). Terrorists are made, not born: Creating terrorists using social psychological conditioning. *Journal of Homeland Security*. Retrieved from [http://www.homelandsecurity.org/journal/Default\\_aspx?oid=109&ocat=1](http://www.homelandsecurity.org/journal/Default_aspx?oid=109&ocat=1)
- The Guardian*. (2018, 19 May). The bombers next door: How an Indonesian family turned into suicide attackers. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/19/indonesia-blasts-surabaya-family-from-good-neighbours-suicide-bombers>
- The Soufan Group. (2015). Foreign Fighters. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq. Retrieved from [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf)
- The Star*. (2018, 25 November). Police to focus on IS women, children. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/11/25/police-to->

focus-on-is-women-children-bukit-aman-looking-out-for-terror-activity-by-msian-returnees-f/

- The Straits Times*. (2014, 17 October). Malaysia civil servant arrested for ISIS links was on long leave: Believed to have met militants in Philippines. Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-civil-servant-arrested-for-isis-links-was-on-long-leave-believed-to-have-met>
- The Straits Times*. (2015, 5 January). Malaysia arrest woman who married ISIS fighter over Sykpe. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-arrests-woman-who-married-isis-fighter-over-skype>
- The Straits Times*. (2018, 1 June). Student, housewife among 15 suspects held in Malaysia for planning attacks. Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/student-housewife-among-15-terror-suspects-held-in-malaysia>
- The Sun Daily Online*. (2017, 1 May). 20 M'sian women looking for ISIS lovers left stranded at Turkish border. Retrieved from <https://www.thesundaily.my/archive/20-msian-women-looking-isis-lovers-left-stranded-turkish-border-DTARCH442605>
- Veldhuis, T., & Staun, J. (2009). *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model*. The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations.
- Victor, B. (2003). *Army of Roses: Inside the Worm of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*. New York: St Martin's Press