

The Rising Role of Women in Terrorism: Between Religious Exploitation and Misguided Empowerment

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For a long time, it was unthinkable that women could become active participants in terrorism. In the context of Indonesia, where women are often associated with cultural norms of civility and religious values rooted in tolerance, the involvement of women in acts of terror challenges long-standing social assumptions.

However, recent events have painted a starkly different picture. History has recorded the presence of women in the narrative of terrorism in Indonesia. One notable case was a woman attempting to breach the grounds of the Presidential Palace in Jakarta while pointing a firearm at security personnel. Incidents like these demonstrate that women are no longer passive observers in the world of terrorism—they have stepped into the forefront.

Several cases highlight this growing trend. Dewi, alongside her husband, carried out a suicide bombing in Makassar. Zakiah Aini, a university student, attempted a lone-wolf attack at the National Police Headquarters (Mabes Polri). Other women have been involved in failed bombing plots, such as the infamous pressure cooker bomb case in Jakarta. In these instances, women appear even more fanatical and aggressive than their male counterparts.

A Long but Overlooked History

Although it may seem like a recent development, women's involvement in terrorism actually spans centuries. Since the 19th century, women have played roles in violent political movements. Historical records show that female militants have been active since the 1970s, particularly in various nationalist and extremist causes.

In Indonesia, women's direct participation in terrorism has only become prominent in recent years, particularly since 2018. This shift coincides with a broader transformation in global jihadist strategies, especially after Al-Qaeda and ISIS revised their doctrinal stance on women's roles in jihad.

Al-Qaeda, under the leadership of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi in 2005, became the first jihadist organization to formally permit women to take up arms—despite previously condemning such involvement as a major transgression. The change was largely a tactical response to battlefield setbacks and declining male recruits.

ISIS followed suit in 2017, adjusting its earlier policy that had declared jihad as an exclusively male duty. The new directive stated that Muslim women were obligated to support male fighters, including by taking part in combat when necessary.

In Indonesia, this ideological shift was echoed by Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), one of the country's most violent extremist groups. JAD encouraged its members—both men and women—to carry out jihad at home if migration to Syria was not possible. Since then, the involvement of Indonesian women in acts of terrorism has become more frequent and visible, marking a new era in gender dynamics within extremist networks.

Why Do Women Join?

Various studies indicate that women's entry into terrorism is often motivated by a sense of emotional obligation and ideological conviction. Some are driven by disillusionment with men's efforts, leading them to believe that they must step forward to assist their husbands or communities. Others are influenced by narratives of religious duty and martyrdom, often reinforced by radical propaganda.

Significantly, many of these women receive explicit legitimization from their groups. For organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, the inclusion of women is not only strategic—it is also

symbolic. As their power wanes and resources dwindle, they embrace more radical tactics, including recruiting women as suicide bombers and combatants. Osama bin Laden himself once praised the role of women in jihad, especially for bearing and raising the next generation of fighters.

Emotional intensity also plays a critical role. Women are often deeply affected by the suffering of their families or communities, making them susceptible to radicalization. Once convinced, they may voluntarily participate in violence, believing it grants them honor, equality, or divine favor. For some, jihad offers a rare form of empowerment—albeit within a deeply patriarchal and militant structure.

The Theological Justification: A Misinterpreted Legacy

Many women who join jihadist movements cite religious inspiration from early Islamic history. They look to figures such as Aisha bint Abu Bakr, Umm Sulaym, Umm Salit, Ar-Rabi' bint al-Mu'awwidz, and Umm 'Atiyyah al-Ansariyyah—women who accompanied the Prophet Muhammad in various battles. These companions are frequently referenced in hadith collections, such as Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, as examples of female courage and piety during times of war.

However, the modern invocation of these historical figures is often selective and taken out of context. Today's female terrorists fight not for a just cause or in defense of their community, but under the banners of extremist ideologies that distort Islam for political ends. In reality, these women are not heroes of the faith—but rather victims of theological manipulation and gendered exploitation in the age of modern terrorism.

Between Agency and Exploitation

The participation of women in terrorism raises complex questions about agency, ideology, and the shifting dynamics of violent extremism. While some may view this involvement as a form of empowerment, it is crucial to recognize that these women are often manipulated through distorted religious teachings and emotional vulnerabilities.

Rather than celebrating their actions, society must understand the broader socio-political mechanisms that lead women down this path. In doing so, we can develop more effective strategies to prevent radicalization, protect vulnerable individuals, and address the root causes of terrorism—regardless of gender.

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