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Hawks, Doves and Canaries: Women and Conflict

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Background

Insurgents, terrorists, and others fomenting violence represent one end on the spectrum of conflict. Although each of these entities has its own separate aim, they all share a primary motivation: destabilization. They strive to weaken international institutions, governments, and even indigenous social systems. By doing so, these groups create an opening that allows their own ideologies to take root and blossom. Those who advocate peace and focus their efforts on stabilizing communities represent the opposite end. In addition, but frequently overlooked, are those who serve as warning signs of impending conflict.

While stability operations doctrine implicitly stresses the importance of ascertaining *all* operationally significant actors along the continuum of conflict, in practice, it is usually only the male combatants and key leaders who are taken into account. The role of women as actors in all phases of conflict is a vital aspect of stability operations, yet is generally ignored. The failure to recognize their varied functions as hawks, doves, and canaries precludes developing the robust and comprehensive situational awareness necessary to stabilize areas experiencing unrest and violence. It also results in missed opportunities with regard to possible courses of action to end conflict and promote stability.

This article discusses women's active agency with regard to pre-conflict, ongoing conflict and post-conflict activities. Concrete examples of women's involvement in all of these phases and their explicit roles are provided as they underpin the irrefutable argument for acknowledging women as critical variables in the stability operations equation and engaging them accordingly. Women's roles as hawks, doves, and canaries are defined as follows and are explored in depth:

Hawks: Those who foment violence and aim to destabilize communities.

Doves: Those who advocate peace and focus their efforts on stabilizing communities

Canaries: Those who serve as warning signs of impending conflict.

Recognizing women's varied roles, knowledge, and views would significantly improve our ability to effectively predict and prevent conflict. In areas experiencing violent unrest, understanding women's

actions in support of conflict would provide a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the “enemy” and hence, the nature of the fight. Finally, partnering with women who promote peace in the design and execution of stability tasks would go a long way in achieving the ultimate objective of sustainable peace.

Stability Operations and Situational Awareness

During [a] conflict diagnosis, ... key actors central to producing, perpetuating, or profoundly changing the societal patterns or issues of institutional performance [are] identified.

Stability Operations Field Manual 3-07^[i]

Stability operations captures the spectrum of conflict that includes pre-, ongoing, and post-conflict phases. Covering a range of activities including counterinsurgency, peace operations, and civil-military relations, it is broad enough to address all aspects of conflict and instability as well as efforts to counteract them. As such, it constitutes an extremely important pillar of the national security agenda. More importantly, stability operations facilitates a deeper understanding of the complexities of conflict, thereby shedding light on how to prevent it.

Engaging in pre- or post-conflict stability operations is necessary to prevent or redress state failure and its resulting adverse regional and global consequences.^[ii] This is nothing new. Contrary to popular belief, the military history of the United States is one characterized by stability operations no less than episodes of major combat. American military forces have fought only 11 conventional wars while the hundreds of other military operations conducted in the intervening years consist primarily of what fall under the rubric of stability operations, i.e., where the majority of effort consists of stability tasks.^[iii] The change in national policy over the past dozen or so years also indicates the importance of stability operations. The development of The U.S. Army *Stability Operations*, Field Manual 3-07 (2008); Department of Defense Directive 3000.5, *Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations* (2005; and DOD Instruction (DODI) 3000.05, *Stability Operations* (2009) all point to the continued necessity for stabilization activities as a means to address threats to national security.

In-depth situational awareness lies at the heart of all successful military operations including stability operations. Without a pro-active strategy underpinned by good intelligence,^[iv] military forces can only react to the situation rather than shape it. Effective stability operations requires a solid understanding of the operational environment to include the composition of local populations and their internal and external relationships, key leaders and influencers (male and female), power dynamics, culture, ethnic, religious, tribal and other defining characteristics, governance structures and practices, decision-making processes, urban/rural characteristics, and livelihoods to name a few. Being aware of and understanding the plethora of variables in the stability equation -- and their relationship to each other -- is vital for those seeking to effectively conduct these activities. Overlooking one or more of these variables can result in at best missed opportunities to encourage a return to normalcy, and – at worst – an upsurge in violence. Identifying who the actors are—both belligerents and peace builders—is one of the first, crucial steps in the process.

Women as Hawks

To beat the guerilla on his own ground, the first essential is knowledge – knowledge about the enemy himself, his methods, strengths, weaknesses, tactics and techniques.

The Guerilla and How to Fight Him, Fleet Marine Force

Reference Publication (FMFRP) 12-25 (v)

Despite the breadth of women's participation in insurgencies and terrorist activities around the world for well over 20 years, the United States has had great difficulty in thinking of females as agents of aggression.^[v] They are generally viewed as inherently peaceful and staunch advocates of non-violence, ^[vi] notwithstanding substantial evidence to the contrary. In reality, they regularly serve as combatants, insurgents, and terrorists in conflicts worldwide as well as providing critical auxiliary support to movements bent on destabilization.

Women currently account for 30-40 percent of the fighting force in many ethno-separatist groups and serve in a wide range of leadership positions.^[vii] Historically, they have been active participants in conflict as well. In liberation struggles in Eritrea, Namibia, South Africa and Nicaragua, for example, women have served in guerrilla armies and even gained military command positions. Many veterans of the war in Vietnam further vouch for the effectiveness of female combatants. Veiled battalions of female Iranian soldiers took up arms in the Iranian revolution under Khomeini.^[viii] In 1994, women were involved in the killing of civilians during the Rwandan genocide, where, it is claimed, the assumption of women's innocence allowed some killers to evade justice.^[ix] Women also played essential roles in several Middle Eastern conflicts, notably the Algerian Revolution (1958-62), the First Lebanon War (1982), the first Palestinian Intifada (1987-91), and the Second or Al Aqsa Intifada (since 2000). In global terms, between the years 1990–2003, females were part of fighting forces in 55 countries and were involved in armed conflicts in 38 of these countries.^[x] Female terrorists accounted for a quarter of fatal attacks in Iraq, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Morocco and Palestine between 1985 and 2012.^[xi]

Women's historical involvement in terrorist organizations also dispels the myth of their innate passivity. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, many women were prominent in Latin American and European terrorist organizations and, depending on the group, may have constituted as much as one-third of the personnel. This was the case in Germany's Red Army Faction and Second of June Movement.^[xii] In Cindy Ness' work on female militancy and terrorism, she points out that in the atmosphere of left-wing terrorist groups during this period, there was a strong female presence. Ulrike Meinhof, female co-leader of the Baader-Meinhof group, progenitor to the Red Army Faction, became associated with the whole era of anti-imperialist protest turned to violence. Leila Khalid, of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), took part in several hijackings that drew world attention to the Palestinian cause. The Japanese Red Army (JRA) -- the goal of which was to overthrow the Japanese Government and foment world revolution -- was founded and led by a woman, Fusako Shigenobu, until her arrest in Japan in November 2000. The Red Brigade, the Marxist-Leninist paramilitary organization that sought to destabilize Italy through sabotage and other violent acts, kidnapped and executed Aldo Moro, a leading politician, in 1978. Approximately 20 of the 60 defendants who stood trial for this kidnapping were women.^[xiii] At its height, the fighting force of the Shining Path in Peru was made up of 30-45 percent females many of whom held prominent positions throughout the organization.^[xiv]

Women's past and continuing participation as "hawks" in conflict^[xv] has been both extensive and decisive in terms of the success of insurgent and terrorist groups. Acknowledging and understanding how

and why they support insurgent campaigns is a key step towards developing effective strategies to counter these movements. If, however, female combatants fail to appear on the radar screen of counterinsurgents and counter-terrorists because of poor situational awareness or cultural or personal bias, then the chance of successfully contesting these movements is degraded. This argument is clearly articulated by David Kilcullen in his article, *Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency*. Although focusing solely on insurgents, Kilcullen's article makes points that are equally valid with regard to terrorists as well. He argues that in dealing with an insurgency, one must not only know and understand the area of operations and its people – e.g., history, terrain, local leaders, social practices, and economic activity – but also acquire a solid understanding regarding the character of the enemy itself.

Who are the insurgents? What drives them? What makes local leaders tick? Counterinsurgency is fundamentally a competition, between each side, to mobilize the population in support of its agenda. So you must understand what motivates the people and how to mobilize them. You need to know why and how the insurgents are getting followers. This means you need to know your real enemy, not a cardboard cut-out.[\[xvi\]](#)

To date, most counterinsurgents and counter-terrorists seem to be satisfied with a “cardboard cut-out” of women living in insurgent- or terrorist-ridden areas. Rarely are they analyzed in terms of their support to the insurgents, influence in the community, personal/familial networks, or group or individual identities like men are. Even in places where women are generally sequestered behind compound walls, they play a key role in insurgencies. Women in Afghanistan, for instance, not only feed insurgents provided with safe harbor in their compounds, they also protect critical information. During a raid on a compound in Kandahar province in 2011, for example, a female International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) soldier discovered a veritable treasure trove of information concerning the insurgency while searching the compound's female residents. The soldier noticed that the Afghan women in the “search” room were trying to surreptitiously pass an infant into the “cleared” room. Finding this behavior suspicious, she asked if she could hold the infant. Upon doing so, the soldier discovered that a hollowed-out Koran had been tucked into the infant's swaddling. Inside the Koran, she found cell phones containing names and numbers of insurgents, hand-written lists of names, and other incriminating documents.[\[xvii\]](#)

Combatants

Although infrequently acknowledged, women and girls participate in contemporary wars as fighters. They conduct combat operations and carry out terrorist acts such as targeting civilians for torture and killing and destroying community infrastructure. These actions impact both the physical and psychological health and survival of those they aim to influence. Like male combatants, female fighters are also not immune from the some of the harsher and more perverted aspects of fighting. In certain areas, for instance, they have witnessed or participated in acts like mutilation, human sacrifice, and forced cannibalism.[\[xviii\]](#)

While there is a tendency to focus on women's victimization during the unrest in Rwanda and the genocide that followed, for example, women played key roles as combatants and predators as well. Thousands of women contributed to the murder of their neighbors, colleagues, friends, and even relatives, as well as strangers. Some women killed with their own hands. In one community, for instance, a pregnant former gendarme shot at thousands of unarmed people and threw grenades at them. An elderly grandmother in Rwanda's second largest city, Gitarama, was accused of murdering dozens of Tutsi baby boys.[\[xix\]](#) Females from every social category and educational background played a role in the killings.

In particular, women in leadership positions were sometimes especially enthusiastic participants in the genocide and used their positions to influence the outcome of events.[xx] Prominent female politicians, including members of President Habyarimana's family and government, such as the Minister of Women's Affairs, local government administrators, female journalists, nuns, teachers and nurses all used their varied positions of authority to support, incite, and carry out violence.[xxi]

During the civil war in Sierra Leone, girls received military training as members of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Training could be intense and lengthy and consisted of how to use guns, engage in physical training, deal with barbed wire, and to kill. Female combatants frequently died in training. They also participated in violent acts such as shooting and killing, stealing properties and looting and burning houses. One female combatant also recounted that in the jungle, RUF members ate humans and reptiles and noted that if she had refused to eat, she would have been killed.[xxii]

Women have participated as planners, perpetrators, and patrons of militancy in the current Kashmir theater of conflict as well. Kashmiri women first received arms training more than 50 years ago in response to the "holy war" launched by tribal invaders from Pakistan to save their Muslim brethren in Kashmir. They accepted this training to provide assistance to their community and to defend themselves. Women's more current contribution to militancy since the 1990s can be seen as an extension of the roles and responsibilities they had demonstrated in other violent situations in the past rather than something new. Between 1990-1992, a number of young Kashmiri women travelled across the border to Pakistan to receive training in arms and ammunition. And again around 2001 reports on Kashmiri women's direct involvement in militant groups and their training in militant camps in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir came to light.[xxiii]

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda has had female combatants participating in the war of terror they have waged since 1986. Often forcibly recruited from Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan, girl combatants comprised 25 percent or more of child soldiers. When they were taken into the force, girls (and boys) were subjected to intensive abuse and torture.[xxiv] Those forcibly conscripted before 2002 who spent time in Sudan were given long and formalized military training. In addition to engaging in combat operations, LRA girl soldiers also were forced to participate in beatings and trampling of other abductees and killing civilians in villages and internally displaced persons camps.[xxv] Forcibly abducted wives of commanders were particularly key to the operations of rebel forces since they controlled the distribution of loot, supervised operations when their captor-husbands were away, and decided on fighting strategies.[xxvi]

Likewise Mozambican girls serving in the armed groups FRELIMO and RENAMO performed a variety of combat roles such as fighters, trainers for incoming recruits, intelligence officers, spies, and weapons experts. Maria F. joined FRELIMO when she was 17 years old and eventually became a captain. "I never forget that during the war we [were] trained how to use guns. I know how to cock the gun. I know everything about guns." At age 15 Banda Z. joined FRELIMO and also received military training. At age 17, she became a tactics instructor, training both males and females in military tactics, use of small arms and light weapons, laying ambushes and map reading.[xxvii]

Over time, the success of Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) armed guerrilla attacks elevated its prestige and significantly enhanced its ability to recruit new members including women. Perceived as an all-embracing, diverse, and multifaceted solution for all oppressed Kosovars, the KLA had soldiers from all walks of life and across all social scales with women and men fighting side by side.[xxviii] As KLA guerrillas, Kosovar women received a month's military training in single sex groups, but served in mixed guerrilla units. Many times brothers and sisters, or husbands and wives, fought alongside one another on the front lines.[xxix]

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or the Tigers) in Sri Lanka has been noteworthy for incorporating women into fighting units both as combatants and suicide bombers.[xxx] It began recruiting women into its ranks initially in response to a shortage of male recruits. However, female Tigers proved to be as eager and as lethal as their male counterparts. In 1983 the organization founded a special section for women called the *Vituthalai Pulikal Munani* (Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers) that began aggressively recruiting women into their fighting cadre. Female Tigers received battle training in India and in Sri Lanka. The women's military wing was a well-organized and highly disciplined force. The LTTE's naval force, the Sea Tigers, and its suicide squad, the Black Tigers, contained large numbers of women as well; estimates varied from around 15-20% to one third of the organization's core combat strength.[xxxi]

Women members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) initially served in support roles as part of the women's paramilitary organization *Cumann na mBan*. In the late 1960s, they argued for their integration into the IRA itself and eventually received military training, learning how to dismantle various weapons at speed and under pressure.[xxxii] By the early 1970's they were directly involved in planning terrorist attacks, making bombs, and carrying out bombings in restaurants, hotels, busses, businesses, and police posts. Two sisters were responsible for masterminding the bombing of London's Old Bailey criminal court in 1973 and eventually received life sentences for their crime. In 1976, more than 100 women guerillas were in the female prison in Armagh and 80% of these were members of *Cumann na mBan*. A senior British Army Officer stressed the threat that female IRA terrorists posed when he stated, "Some of these women are far more ruthless than their menfolk... [and] many are more dedicated to the cause..." [xxxiii]

Women not only serve as combatants in secular insurgent movements, but also in Islamic insurgent groups. Salafi jihadist ideology has, in fact, modified its stance on women's active participation in violent jihad in recent years. No longer are militant activities a domain reserved for men. Abu Haniya, an Amman-based analyst of Islamic groups, noted that jihadist ideology has moved toward the acceptance of women's participation in armed actions. He notes that while "the traditional jihadists limit women's participation in jihad to supporting militant men in activities such as nursing, teaching, and moral support, the new ideologues have begun to mention female participation in armed actions." [xxxiv] In fact, the leader of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, Yusuf al Uyayri, was among the first ideologues to encourage women to join jihad. [xxxv]

As a result of this Islamic extremist call to arms for women, their ranks are growing in many jihadist insurgent and terrorist organizations. In Somalia, for example, women are now serving as insurgents in al-Shabaab, the Somalia-based insurgent group affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. As al Shabaab began to encourage people from across society to join their ranks, it specifically targeted women. The insurgent group uses diverse propaganda tactics including **humanitarian aid**, social media and mosque outreach as recruitment tools.[xxxvi] In 2012 Sheikh Fu'ad Mohamed Khalaf Shongole, the chief of awareness-raising of al-Shabaab, stated, "At this stage of the jihad, fathers and mothers must send their unmarried girls to fight alongside the (male) militants." [xxxvii] Al-Shabaab leader **Ibrahim Haji Jama Mee'aad** has also issued statements urging women to join the insurgency.

These concerted recruitment efforts have resulted in hundreds of Somali women have been trained in camps in the quest of so-called martyrdom. In her article discussing Somali women and al-Shabaab, Anne-Yolanda Bilali notes that women who have joined the insurgency are considered "fierce combatants who at times can be crueler than their [male] counterparts." [xxxviii] A British woman, Samantha Lewthwaite, has also joined al Qaeda as a terrorist operative. She trains an all-female suicide bomber squad targeting Westerners in East Africa as part of the al Qaeda's global jihad. The former wife of one of the suicide

bombers who attacked the London Underground in July 2005, and known to her devoted acolytes as *dada mzungu* – Swahili for white sister –, Lewthwaite not only commands an all-female mujahid terror squad, but also coordinates other terrorist operations against non-Muslims.[\[xxxix\]](#)

Chechen women, too, have served as female combatants in support of the Taliban in Afghanistan. In 2011, Afghan police in the province of Kunduz were searching for up to 15 Chechen women who were providing medical assistance to injured Taliban fighters while others were experts at building roadside bombs and suicide vests. A former Taliban commander from the area confirmed the presence of female fighters.[\[xl\]](#)

Suicide Bombers

Terrorists have a range of options including bombings, sniper attacks, sabotage, and in the extreme, suicide terrorism to counteract what is viewed as oppressive or intrusive behavior of states or organizations – or anyone or anything representing them. Like all other types of violent militant undertakings, suicide attacks are carried out by women as well as men. In fact, women have a notable history of serving as suicide bombers in support of insurgent and terrorist movements. Out of the approximately 17 groups that have employed the tactic of suicide bombing, women have been operatives in more than half. Between 1985 and 2006, there were more than 220 female suicide bombers representing 15 percent of the total number of such attacks.[\[xli\]](#) Even in insurgencies that hold religiously conservative views of women’s proper role in society, i.e., as nurturers and caretakers of families, women are recruited to serve as suicide bombers. Mia Bloom, an expert in suicide terrorism, notes that the upsurge in the number of female bombers over the years has come from both secular and religious organizations despite initial resistance by religious groups to women serving in this role.[\[xlii\]](#)

Female suicide bombers have a tactical advantage in many countries that require women to be modestly attired since it is easy for women to conceal weapons and other critical combat-related items in their robes and veils. Particularly in countries like Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq, and Algeria, women have used local cultural expectations about appropriate clothing and behavior to secretly transport small arms and explosives. In Sri Lanka, Tamil nationalist women have done the same to gain access to targets as suicide bombers, hiding belt bombs under saris or dresses. One notorious example of this was the 1991 suicide-bomb assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by a female LTTE operative.[\[xliii\]](#)

Perhaps the most well-known female suicide bombers are Chechen women. They are considered to be a very effective “front line” in the Chechen struggle.[\[xliv\]](#) As the conflict between Chechen civilians and the Russian government turned into a full-scale war in 2000, the Chechens began to use suicide terrorism against government targets. Since Russian troops had been instructed to focus their attention on men between the ages of 17 and 40, the Chechen leader Shamil Basayev opted to use female bombers. Chechen female suicide bombers became known as the Black Widows. They not only attacked military targets, but also civilians. In preparation to serve as suicide bombers in “jihadi missions,” women were sent to rebel camps where they spent their days training and reading the Qur’an.[\[xlv\]](#)

The Black Widows have been involved in a variety of suicide terrorist acts including wearing explosive bomb belts, carrying bomb-filled bags, and driving cars or trucks filled with explosives. Forty-six Chechen women have been involved in terrorist suicide attacks and 23 of them successfully detonated their bombs.[\[xlvi\]](#) These female terrorists also participated in two of the largest mass hostage-taking events associated with suicide terrorism to date: the takeovers of the Moscow Dubrovka Theater and Beslan school in North Ossetia, Russia. At the Dubrovka Theater siege that involved the taking of more than 850 hostages, 18 of the 50 terrorists were Chechen women. These women were armed with Makarov pistols and had improvised explosive devices (IEDs) strapped to their bodies. In fact, only the female

hostage takers wore suicide vests, not the men.^[xlvii] Black Widows have also been involved in many other terrorist attacks. They have detonated themselves at religious ceremonies, at a rock concert at Tushino Airfield in North Ossetia, in airplanes, and in public places like bus stops and metros.^[xlviii] In 2003, six out of seven suicide bombings carried out by Chechen rebels were carried out by women.^[xlix] The next year, 2004, almost all of the more than 12 attacks on Russia involved the Black Widows.^[l]

The Black Tigers (LTTE's division of suicide bombers) were a highly disciplined and feared force that carried out terrorist attacks as part of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan women comprised one-third to one-half of this elite commando unit. In fact, LTTE was the first terrorist organization to institutionalize the practice of using women as suicide bombers.^[li] Female Black Tigers were trained in the technique of suicide bombing and were shown how to walk and sit as if they were pregnant while carrying explosives around their waists.^[lii] This unit conducted over 168 suicide bombings between 1980 and 2002, more than any other terrorist organization, killing approximately 1,500 people.^[liii] Between 1987 and the end of the Sri Lankan insurgency, LTTE women engaged in 30 to 40 suicide bombings, making the Tigers the most prolific female suicide bombers of the modern era. ^[liv]

In addition to secular groups, Islamic terrorist organizations like al Qaeda, al-Shabaab, and the Taliban likewise have female suicide bombers in their ranks. In Pakistan, *Tehrik-e-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP) – also known as the Pakistani Taliban -- established a women's suicide squad called *Jannati Khawateen* (Women of Paradise). TTP is an umbrella group of various Islamist militant groups intent on resisting the Pakistani state, enforcing their interpretation of Shari'ah law, and operating against the NATO-led forces in Afghanistan. Its female suicide squad consists of 12-16 women and its members are trained to operate like commandos using machine-guns and hand grenades for carrying out terrorist attacks to accomplish their mission. This suicide squad was specifically established to attack difficult or high value targets. An example of this was the November 19, 2012 attack on the *Jamaat-i-Islami* (JI) leader, Qazi Hussain Ahmed. The TTP's hardcore wing is said to have sent a woman bomber to carry out this attack. Sources also stated that at least two female members of the suicide squad had been given the task to operate in Lahore and Rawalpindi. To be operationally more effective, they had been asked to do away with the traditional "burqa" and wear only a shawl (chaadar) to hoodwink the security officials.^[lv]

In addition to recruiting adult women to serve as suicide attackers, the Pakistani Taliban has also targeted young girls to carry out these attacks. In June 2011 an eight-year old girl named Sohana attempted to carry out a suicide bombing among Pakistani troops in northeastern Pakistan. She had been kidnapped by the Pakistani Taliban earlier and taken to an insurgent training camp. She foiled the attack by alerting police at a checkpoint before her vest could detonate. She is not the only girl who has been trained to conduct a suicide bombing. In 2010 a 12-year old Pakistani girl named Meena Gul was trained to be a "human bomb" by her own sister-in-law, a cell leader. She said she was brainwashed to kill Pakistani troops in one of several camps in northwestern Pakistan and northeastern Afghanistan, but managed to escape her Taliban kidnappers.^[lvi] Under questioning, Meena Gul confirmed the existence of female suicide cells and stated that female suicide bombers were trained in small cells on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. They were dispatched to their missions with a sermon, "God will reward you with a place in heaven."^[lvii] These female suicide cells were established by and remain under the command of Qari Zia Rahman, the dual-hatted Taliban and al Qaeda commander who operates on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border. He is the Taliban's top regional commander as well as a member of al Qaeda. ^[lviii]

Somali women's enlistment as jihadists has also resulted in their participation as suicide bombers. In June 2011 a woman killed Somalia's Interior Minister in a suicide attack.^[lix] In April of the following year a young woman strapped with explosives blew herself up at a ceremony held at the National Theater in

Mogadishu, killing 10 people including the country's Olympic and football bosses.[[lx](#)]

Like other women living in the midst of an insurgency, Iraqi women's role in the insurgency similarly grew over time from providing auxiliary support to serving as suicide bombers. By 2007, women had carried out at least seven suicide bombings and the insurgents had established all-female cells where women were trained on how to hide a suicide belt under loose clothing.[[lxi](#)] Iraqi women suicide terrorists conducted 32 attacks in 2008. Both al Qaeda and its ally, *Ansar al Sunnah*, specialized in using female suicide bombers in Baghdad and Diyala province. Samira Jassim, a member of an *Ansar al Sunnah* female suicide ring, recruited, indoctrinated, and trained women to carry out the attacks for the group. She recruited 80 female suicide bombers, 28 of whom carried out attacks.[[lxii](#)] Al Qaeda even dispatched mentally handicapped women to catch security forces off guard. In 2008, two of these women attacked markets in Baghdad, killing 73 people and wounding more than 167.[[lxiii](#)]

Providing Support

Fighting forces are dependent upon a wide variety of support in order to carry out their missions. At the very basic level, they must have food, shelter, and arms. In discussing the elements of an insurgency, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, notes the importance of support by auxiliaries, e.g., active sympathizers who provide important support services. Auxiliaries assist insurgents in numerous ways, including: running safe houses, storing and transporting weapons and supplies, acting as couriers, as well as providing passive intelligence collection, early warning of counterinsurgent movements, funding, forged or stolen documents, and access to or introductions to potential supporters.[[lxiv](#)]

This type of critical assistance is provided by both male and female auxiliaries around the world. In her essay, *Women, gender, and conflict: Making the connections*, Martha Thompson emphasizes that women are an integral part of war economies. They wash diamonds, smuggle drugs, farm crops for insurgents, are used as war slaves in resource extraction, sell food to insurgents and government forces alike, and act as porters for rebels.[[lxv](#)] Carolyn Nordstrom's ethnographic work concerning the conflict in Sri Lanka also highlights the role of female auxiliaries. She notes that by providing vital support to militants, women "were the backbone of the war." [[lxvi](#)] They transported messages, munitions, supplies and food. They also ran arms, procured survival necessities, acted as communication systems, and conducted reconnaissance.

Similarly, Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana, in their article discussing the roles of females in conflicts in Uganda, Mozambique and Sierra Leone, point out that girls and women perform the majority of domestic and support roles in armed groups.[[lxvii](#)] They additionally serve as spies as well as cooks, health workers and porters. During the Mozambican civil war, female combatants from Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) also provided domestic labor as part of their support in addition to serving in a variety of other roles like medics and first aid technicians. Young women served in RENAMO's senior intelligence department, too, constituting 10 percent of over 100 intelligence officers. [[lxviii](#)]

Women in the Middle East have also been actively engaged in providing support to insurgent and rebel forces. Iraqi women assist the insurgency by sheltering insurgents, looking after hostages and smuggling weapons.[[lxix](#)] A wife of a member of the Islamic State of Iraq, i.e., the local al-Qaida branch in Iraq, stated that women would "hide men... and disguise them in women's clothes and help them." [[lxx](#)] The importance of women's support for terrorist organizations like al-Qaida is underscored by the Iraqi Government's official acknowledgement of this situation. In 2011 the government launched an anti-al-Qaida media campaign that urged women not to marry insurgents. Marry a terrorist, and your children will have no rights, the slogan goes. Marry a terrorist, and you'll be shunned by society.[[lxxi](#)] Syrian women, as well, have been active in the fight against Bashar al-Assad's regime from the start, dating back to the

peaceful demonstrations in early 2011 in the southern city of Dara'a. They have remained actively involved even as the fight has become bloody. These women smuggle guns to the opposition and make improvised explosive devices in their kitchens. They work in field hospitals saving the lives of Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters.^[lxxii] Syrian women also participate in aid relief deliveries both to FSA-controlled areas and -- covertly and at great risk to themselves -- areas still under government control. In order to successfully carry out these deliveries and evade arrest, women inside Syria communicate largely through Skype and Facebook, providing neighborhood-level reports on security conditions and aid needs.^[lxxiii]

During the conflict in Northern Ireland, women belonging to the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a loyalist paramilitary group, had the main responsibility for transporting, moving, hiding, cleaning and storing weapons and explosives materials. One female UVF member noted that in the early years of the "Troubles," "you used to go up the road with your pram, the child sittin' in it, and 'hello' to the soldiers and they didn't know what you had under the pram!" (Guns were hidden under the child.) Women also took arms away from male UVF members when it was too dangerous for them to carry them. As one UVF woman stated, "Many's the time a fella just walked past you, you just opened your bag (for the weapon) and walked on, you know?"^[lxxiv] Female members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) lent the same type of support to their male colleagues. British army officers noted that women would wait outside buildings from which IRA snipers would shoot and then stash the dismantled weapons under their babies in the carriage while the gunman passed back through the army cordon.^[lxxv]

Influence and Information Operations

In addition to providing key support such as domestic, medical, and courier assistance, women have also fortified insurgencies by inciting men to go out and kill, creating and spreading propaganda, and increasing the number of supporters. Their carefully crafted information operations not only shape and influence the environment, but also set the stage for long-term success by inculcating youth with the movement ideology.

Women in the Kashmir region of India have been extremely effective in the conduct of information operations, using demonstrations, slogans, songs, and their influence as mothers on behalf of the cause of militant groups. As militancy increased in Kashmir in the late 1980s and early 1990s, so too did the insurgency grow against the Indian government with women at the forefront of inciting aggression. After defeating the Soviets, mujahideen began to turn towards Kashmir and other places to the east. Other militant groups like the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) were being established and there was a rise in Islamist groups worldwide. All of these factors fed into the growing insurgency. Local residents began to agitate against the Indian security forces, often pelting them with stones and participating in protest demonstrations in which women were in the lead. Large numbers of women led public protests against the state and the army. They were vociferously in favor of militancy, singing the praises of the mujahideen.^[lxxvi]

Kashmiri women's slogans are indicative of the power of women's voices to impel men to support Islamic militants and fight for the cause of an Islamic state. In her article about women's relationship to militancy in Kashmir^[lxxvii], Swati Parashar quotes the following slogan that was highly popular during the 1990s: *Ay mard-e-mujahid jag zara, ab waqt-e-shahadat aaya hai* (O holy warriors rise and awake. The time for your martyrdom has come). Women implored the men to fight and embrace martyrdom for the cause. In the early days of the militancy, women would also come out spontaneously to sing the *wanuwān* (the traditional Kashmiri song of celebration), singing the praises of the mujahid (militant). Because motherhood is revered in Kashmiri society, women's passion for militancy plays a key role in the lives of boys in particular. One former militant noted that "boys... get inspired from what they hear from their

mothers.... If the mother is passionate about the cause, the cause will find more and more people joining the movement.”[\[lxxviii\]](#)

Perhaps more significantly, Parashar notes that the movement becomes a legitimate cause as “mothers” become revolutionary bridges; they connect their children to the cause. Women’s role as agents of influence -- both in terms of fomenting conflict and withdrawing support from -- it is summarized by another former militant:

Once you remove the mothers, it affected (sic) the functioning of the militants, the pressure starts building upon them. So if you remove the mother you remove the social sanctity.... If women folk are helping you in the cause, they are the most who push you and once they feel that the cause is of no worth they may help you to get back .[\[lxxix\]](#)

Likewise, the influence of mothers in southern Sudan is formidable when it comes to encouraging men to engage in war and conflict. In its report on women’s participation in peace building and post-conflict governance, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) CARE International pointed out that women are a source of spiritual support and motivation for those going to war in Acholi, South Sudan, especially the men. A CARE facilitator highlighted the significance of Acholi women’s support and motivation for male combatants by stating, “Without your mother’s blessings in case you are going to war, you will never win the war or battle.”[\[lxxx\]](#)

Like their Kashmiri counterparts, *Cumann na mBan*, the IRA women’s auxiliary and other nationalist/republican women used information operations as a tool to support and strengthen the insurgents. These women motivated IRA members and promoted the group’s ideology by actively participating in community protests.[\[lxxxi\]](#)

Female al Qaeda members also conduct information operations to recruit jihadists, support terror, and spread propaganda. Malika el Aroud (also known by her nom de guerre, Oum Obeyda) is a prominent example of an information operations expert. A Moroccan who immigrated to Belgium with her family when she was a child, Malika is an active supporter of al Qaeda. She shows her support by distributing propaganda over the Internet, publishing images of executions and mutilations, and operating jihadi websites. She urges men to go to Iraq and Afghanistan on jihad and encourages women to support them. Her propaganda efforts have also promoted domestic terror cells in Europe. [\[lxxxii\]](#) A counterterror official in Europe noted that Malika “plays a very important strategic role as a source of inspiration... and [is] extremely dangerous.”[\[lxxxiii\]](#) Although Malika refrains from active participation in bombings and other violent attacks, it is her pen, or rather her laptop, that is mightier than the sword.[\[lxxxiv\]](#) According to an article in the New York Times, her mission is “to write, to speak out. That’s my jihad. You can do many things with words. Writing is also a bomb.”[\[lxxxv\]](#) She has been charged with indirect responsibility for the deaths of several European Muslims in Afghanistan. She was also complicit in the assassination of the Taliban’s chief rival, Ahmad Shah Massoud, in 2001. Malika’s information operations are so successful that the “Voice of the Oppressed” website described her as a female holy warrior for the twenty-first century.[\[lxxxvi\]](#)

Malika el Aroud is not alone among women in her use of the Internet to conduct information operations. In Italy, Umm Yahya Aysah (Barbara) Farina directs the website and blog *Al Muhajidah magazine* that supports the radicalized notion of jihad. American Colleen LaRose, known as Jihad Jane, also used the Internet and YouTube to recruit men and women for jihad, help terrorists, and raise money for terrorist operations. Mia Bloom, counterterror expert, notes that women’s information operations on the Internet

have “become a force to be reckoned with in the globalized jihad.”[\[lxxxvii\]](#)

David Kilcullen’s work on counterinsurgency reinforces this notion by stressing the importance of women’s influence. He points out that in traditional societies, women are hugely influential in forming the social networks that insurgents use for support. He goes on to say, “Win the women, and you own the family unit. Own the family, and you take a big step forward in mobilizing the population.”[\[lxxxviii\]](#)

Media Targeting Female Supporters and Insurgents

Recognizing the value of women’s influence in increasing support for its ideological goals and terrorist activities, insurgent organizations and those promoting terrorism have developed media targeting women.

Al Qaeda launched a women’s magazine, al Shamikha (Majestic Woman), for example, to encourage female backers and increase their number. Nicknamed Jihad Cosmo, the magazine's goal is to educate women and involve them in the war against the enemies of Islam. The magazine mixes beauty and fashion tips with advice on suicide bombings. Readers are told it is their duty to raise children to be mujahideen ready for jihad and to give their lives for the Islamic cause. Single women are also given advice on marrying a mujahid. One al Qaeda statement in particular encapsulates just how important women’s support is:

Because women constitute half of the population... the enemies of Islam are bent on preventing the Muslim woman from knowing the truth about her religion and her role, since they know all too well what would happen if women entered the field of jihad.[\[lxxxix\]](#)

In 2004 al Qaeda also created a Web-based women’s magazine called *al Khansa’a* that is published by the Women’s Information Office in the Arab Peninsula. Al Khansa’a, a 7th century female poet and convert, is known for celebrating the deaths of her sons in battle. Although no longer published, this webzine included articles discussing military training for women, a biography of a female mujahid, and advised women to stay physically fit to be ready for jihad.[\[xc\]](#)

From 2010- 2011, Palestinian Authority TV (PA TV) aired an Arab world video depicting terrorists and fighting women as role models. The video presented women throughout history who were famous for martyrdom and terrorist activity as well as women from the 20th century like Dalal Mughrabi, who led the terror attack in which 37 Israeli civilians were killed, and Djamila Bouhired, an Algerian terrorist who became a political activist.[\[xci\]](#)

Women as Doves

“Women are half of every community.... Are they, therefore, not also half of every solution?”

Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab, Namibia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, President of the Security Council during October 2000 when UNSCR 1325 was passed

“A major flaw in existing [conflict transformation] efforts is the imbalanced attention that analysts give to sources and drivers of conflict, as opposed to sources and actors with the potential to mitigate conflict.”

Sanam Naraghi Anderlini

Women Building Peace

The final phase in the continuum of conflict involves moving from an unstable environment to a stable one. According to military doctrine, this requires transforming the dynamics of conflict into processes for constructive, positive change. In addition to reducing the means and motivations for violent conflict, the process of conflict transformation should also develop viable peaceful alternatives for the competitive pursuit of political and socioeconomic aspirations.^[xcii] It also calls for building creative solutions necessary to improve relationships and requires an innate understanding of underlying relational, social, and cultural patterns.^[xciii]

Although not generally recognized by those in positions of power, women frequently have a vital interest in facilitating the transition from a state of conflict to one of peace and stability and, hence, are frequently at the forefront of efforts designed to support this shift.^[xciv] As those primarily responsible for ensuring the survival of their families during conflict, women are highly attuned to the dynamics surrounding it. They are adept at developing strategies to survive since they have a solid understanding of the local context including important social relationships, cultural norms, and patterns of behavior. In his work on the political economy of war, Phillipe le Billon emphasizes this point by drawing attention to women’s ability to develop coping strategies in war economies. He notes that in subsistence and informal economy activities, for instance, it is often largely up to women to maintain the minimum level of production and social cohesion for daily survival during conflicts.^[xcv] Their distinctive ability to devise survival strategies prevents a total breakdown of the social fabric necessary to maintain families and communities during conflict.

Just as these particular skills and capacities establish a modicum of stability in wartime, so, too, are they necessary for stabilizing and rebuilding community life during the transition period. This fact – as well as the need to identify women of influence and support their efforts – has been recognized by several prominent entities including Foreign Ministers of the G-8 industrial nations,^[xcvi] the European Platform for Conflict Prevention and Transformation,^[xcvii] UN Security Council Resolution 1325 National Action Plans (NAPs) of 40-plus countries,^[xcviii] NATO,^[xcix] and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).^[c] Accordingly, women’s understanding of and particular perspective on conflict, makes them well suited to contribute to discussions concerning vital stabilization issues such as reconciliation, establishing fair and effective justice systems, ridding institutions of corruption, and providing health care, education, and other social services.

Building Bridges and Resolving Conflicts

According to peace builder and scholar John Paul Lederach, transitioning to peace is generally best accomplished by middle-range leaders, e.g., civil society leaders as well as ethnic and religious leaders among others. The position and influence of these leaders is not based on political or military power, but rather derived from ongoing relationships. These relationships may be professional, institutional, or formal, or simply be a matter of friendship and acquaintance.^[c] Because these mid-level leaders connect the top and bottom levels while also cutting across opposing sides of the conflict, they have the greatest

potential to bring people together and build peace.[ciii] Lederach further notes that by striving to build bridges to their counterparts across the lines of conflict, these leaders are the ones best positioned to sustain conflict transformation. [ciii]

Women tend to be the primary bridge builders during and after conflict. Acknowledging that they must work together in order to survive conflicts, women recognize that this same collaboration is necessary to reconcile warring factions and reunite disparate factions to move towards peace. As a result, women are often the first to work across societal divisions and develop a common agenda for peace. They lobby for ceasefires, create campaigns and demonstrations to encourage reconciliation and peace building, report on human rights abuses, and establish networks to care for victims of war. Women are also instrumental in rebuilding the less tangible institutions of society that are key to firmly establishing a lasting peace. In addition to starting clinics, schools, and informal financial systems, women frequently institute security networks, set up trade routes to bring in essential supplies, and play fundamental roles in reintegrating the war-maimed, soldiers, and the tortured back into daily society. In addition, they counsel a generation of traumatized children, redesign families who have lost members to the conflict, and re-establish peaceful ideals over those of violent revenge. This rebuilding is critical to a society's survival and ensures that it will not revert to ongoing cycles of violent conflict.[civ]

Women are an important part of local peace alliances and other efforts designed to stem conflict and promote peace. As bridge builders, they actively maintain social networks and connections with groups or individuals considered "the enemy" for long periods.[cv] The Kosovo Women's Network (KWN), for instance, is an organization renowned for its outreach to "enemy" communities. Founded in 2000, it is comprised of 68 women's organizations of diverse ethnicities and geographic regions that advocates on behalf of Kosovar women. One of KWN's co-founders, Igballe Rugova, a Kosovar Albanian, became involved with Women in Black Serbia[cvi] during the 1990s when it was protesting against the human rights abuses of Kosovo Albanians perpetrated by the Slobodan Milosevic-led regime. Women in Black Serbia was an organization made up of Kosovar Serbs and Kosovar Albanians who worked together to promote peace and justice, and refused violence. Her experience with Women in Black Serbia and her relationship with its members led Rugova to continue efforts to bridge the divide between Kosovar Serbs and Albanians after the fall of Milosevic.[cvii] As an example, Kosovar Albanian members of KWN regularly traveled to Serbian enclaves in Kosovo to deliver humanitarian assistance and communicate with Serbian women.[cviii] By maintaining these relationships, KWN directly contributed to the stability and peace of local communities and also served as a role model for the Kosovo government, other organizations, and Kosovo citizens. Rugova also co-founded the Regional Women's Lobby for Peace, Security and Justice in South East Europe (RWL) that brought together prominent women leaders from the region to promote a peaceful solution to Kosovo. The Lobby served as a space where women politicians and civil society leaders could make statements that promoted peace and stability even though they, at times, contradicted the official views of their national governments.[cix]

Women from the Solomon Islands also took an active role in mitigating ethnic conflict in their country -- locally referred to as 'the ethnic tension' -- that began in 1998, when a group of militant youths (Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA)) attacked settlements of islanders, predominantly from the neighboring island of Malaita, in northwest Guadalcanal. Their actions were ignited by the failure of successive national governments to address issues raised by the indigenous Gwale people of Guadalcanal. The aggressive behavior of the GRA resulted in some 25,000 Malaitans fleeing Guadalcanal and an estimated 11,000 local Gwale people fleeing the capital city to the interior of the island.[cx]

Female Solomon Islanders sought to end the fighting by bridging the divide between the two primary militant groups, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) and the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) -- the GRA's

successor organization -- , and promoting peace at all levels of society. They came together within their spheres of influence—churches, homes, markets—many times at great personal risk, to encourage an end to the violence. Additionally, national women’s bodies with substantial influence at the local and national level were formed, aimed at brokering peace and disseminating information. The organization Women for Peace worked to build trust and confidence between the two militant groups through sharing perspectives, exchanging information, and raising women’s issues, as well as by letting the militants know the extent of the suffering caused to women and children as a result of the violence. [cxi] In its role as peace broker, Women for Peace negotiated peace between the women from Malaita who were confined to the capital city of Honiara on Guadalcanal and the women from the Guadalcanal Plains who were unable to access Honiara due to checkpoints. The women exchanged food and set up a market whereby those in Honiara could exchange goods for fresh foods from the plains. The market ran for many years and provided a meeting point for women to share stories and ideas and maintain connections. Their activities were supplemented in 2001 by the establishment of the media organization focused on women and peace, The Women’s Voice. The objective of this organization was to influence public opinion about women and peace issues, and to provide timely and relevant information that would enable women to make informed choices.[cxii] Despite Solomon Island women’s significant contributions to negotiating peace as well as testimony from militants concerning women’s important role in persuading them to agree to the initial ceasefire provisions, these women’s organizations were not invited to participate in any of the peace processes at the government and regional assistance level. Likewise, they were not invited to contribute to the Townsville Peace Agreement process between the MEF and IFM that successfully calmed the situation in Honiara and the Islands.[cxiii]

Afghan women are also active peace builders, even in rural communities where they are mistakenly believed to have virtually no influence. A few years after the return of the international community to Afghanistan in 2001, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) sponsored a community peace-building program in eastern Afghanistan that was designed to diminish conflict and promote inter-communal interaction, trust-building, and cooperation between local Tajik residents and Pashtun refugees returning to the area. Women were recruited to participate in the program and ended up contributing significantly to decreasing tensions in local communities. One of the program’s peace facilitators noted that,

“village women, who are regularly put down by the men as illiterate and therefore incapable of making ‘sound decisions,’ are actually much more motivated to make peace and resolve conflicts than the men are... The men will not make peace even if they are paid to do so, but the women do it freely and easily, out of their hearts, and yet we are not recognizing their hard work.”[cxiv]

Afghan women elders living in rural areas are also actively involved in resolving conflicts within their villages and in this way play an important role in promoting stability. Female elders have traditionally resolved disagreements dealing with women, children and, at times, even between men. To leverage this existing resource, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) funded a dispute resolution program designed to involve more Afghan women in this process and improve their ability to do so. As Michelle Maiese points out in her essay on peace building, “building on cultural resources and utilizing local mechanisms for handling disputes can be quite effective in resolving conflicts and transforming relationships.”[cxv] The USAID conflict resolution program achieved these ends by establishing women’s dispute resolution groups known locally as *spinsary groups*. As of 2011 almost 1,000 women had participated in *spinsaries*. Receiving training about Islamic law, Afghan law, women’s rights and dispute resolution skills, Afghan spinsary members have been key to preventing an escalation in violence in many

conflict-ridden villages by resolving arguments in a timely and informed manner.[[cxvi](#)]

Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appears to be intractable, women have a long history of trying to resolve it. Women on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli divide took to the streets in the late 1980s, for instance, pressing for a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The international media first took notice of the active participation of women in the arena of Palestinian-Israeli politics with the outbreak of the first Palestinian Uprising, known as the Intifada, in 1987. Mainstream media commentators were largely unaware that, for Palestinian women, the long history of political involvement and organizing at the community level and within the national liberation movement triggered their seemingly unprecedented political mobilization. The Intifada provided Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, who had participated in literacy programs and skill-training courses operated by the women's committees, with both an opportunity and an excuse to join the women's movement and to put what they had learned to use.[[cxvii](#)]

On the Israeli side, Jewish women, whose political involvement was previously marginalized in the name of national security, were inspired by the visibility of Palestinian women at the forefront of the Intifada. The result was a plethora of exclusively female and implicitly, if not explicitly, feminist initiatives calling for justice and peace. Groups like Women in Black, the Women's Organizations for Women Political Prisoners (OPFPP), Israeli Women Against the Occupation (SHANI), the Women's Peace Coalition, and the Israeli Women's Peace Net (RESHET) burst onto the Israeli political scene, initiating numerous demonstrations, petition and letter-writing campaigns, solidarity visits to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and a series of local and international peace conferences. These grassroots initiatives were designed to influence public opinion in Israel and to put pressure on its political leaders to engage in peace negotiations.[[cxviii](#)]

Good Governance

In addition to reconciliation, dispute resolution, collaboration and other efforts designed to build bridges and bring about peace, establishing effective governance mechanisms and providing justice are also critical to stabilizing communities and preventing a return to violence. With regard to governance, examples of women's participation in promoting good governance abound, but unfortunately are regularly overlooked. In Kosovo for instance, Luleta Pula, the Albanian Kosovar leader of a social democratic party, headed the 60,000 woman-strong wing of the LDK (Democratic League of Kosovo) party in 1990. Ethnic Albanian Kosovar women had been very active for 10 years or more in running the alternative society under the Serbs that included managing underground municipalities and judiciaries. Despite Kosovar women's extensive governance experience, Dr. Bernard Kouchner, special representative of the UN Secretary-General in Kosovo at the time, appointed the 17-person Kosovar Transitional Governing Council without a single woman on it. [[cxix](#)]

During the transition from the authoritarian regime led by Saddam Hussein to the post-Saddam, democratic regime, Iraqi female parliamentarians were considered more "forward leaning," willing to engage in and seek common solutions than their male counterparts.[[cxx](#)] Violence, chaos and threats to their lives notwithstanding, these women sought to find ways to bring peace and stability to the country. They collaborated with Iraqi women active in civil society in order to promote human rights, tolerance, and democracy. Recognizing the direct linkages between human rights and increasing sectarianism and religious extremism, for example, Iraqi women formally noted their concern in 2006 over a proposed draft constitution article calling for clergymen to sit on the Higher Federal Court. They believed that if approved, this article would "decrease and tamper with the role of the judiciary system." [[cxxi](#)] Women government officials, both parliamentarians and ministers, continue to promote stability and peace in Iraq. In February 2013, these women, along with rights activists, launched a peace initiative that called on

Iraqis to reject violence and sectarianism, and support civil peace and co-existence. Parliament Member Wahda al-Jumaily stated that the initiative compels Iraqis to "make every effort to reinforce national unity; protect our social fabric, civil peace and citizen solidarity; and fight all types of violence and extremism in Iraqi society."[\[cxxii\]](#)

While women's involvement in governance can be direct like that of Kosovar and Iraqi women, it can also be indirect. Because women are largely excluded from the formal political process in many countries, their role in governance is commonly realized through civil society. Lessons learned from conflict-affected societies worldwide demonstrate that the involvement of civil society in post-conflict peace building and development—particularly with regard to governance issues—is crucial to long-term stability.[\[cxxiii\]](#) Constituting a significant portion of civil society leaders and activists, women's influence on government officials and processes can be significant.

An assessment of governance in Cambodia, for example, revealed that civil society plays a vital role in governance through project implementation (e.g., education, awareness raising, networks, interventions such as legal representation, and media) and its monitoring or "watchdog" role. Cambodian women's civil society activities not only ensure ownership of a democratization process among citizens, but also demand greater accountability, thus promoting good governance.[\[cxxiv\]](#) Specifically, Cambodian women promoted good governance by conducting initiatives that tackled corruption, engaged in nonviolent dispute resolution at the community level, promoted human rights, fostered cross-party connections, and empowered women at the grassroots.[\[cxxv\]](#) Their pivotal role in stabilizing the country during the reconstruction not only contributed to good governance, but paved the way for sustainable peace as well.

Although still embroiled in a bitter war, Syrian women who support the opposition are already preparing for the post-conflict, rebuilding phase. As they provide support to combatants and non-combatants, they also document incidents of torture and sexual violence, in the hope that such information will be useful in a future war-crimes tribunal.[\[cxxvi\]](#) They have further begun to organize themselves nationally in order to prepare for their participation in the governance activities of the new regime. In 2013 Syrian women gathered in Doha to discuss their role in Syria's transition to a peaceful democracy bound by the rule of law. The meeting resulted in the creation of a national network called the Syrian Women's Network. Recognizing their critical role in the early days of the revolution by being some of the first to openly protest against the regime as well as their activities in the on-going struggle running humanitarian assistance networks, fighting on the frontlines as combatants, and serving on local community councils, Syrian women established this network in order to ensure their continued involvement in all aspects of peace, security and governance during the transition from conflict to peace.[\[cxxvii\]](#)

Rajaa al-Talli, co-founder of the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria, underscored the need for women to play a more integrated role in a post-Assad Syria "from transitional justice, to rule of law, to governance, and getting more women involved in the decision making process."[\[cxxviii\]](#) Al-Talli points out that women's equal participation in the rebuilding process also helps to push back against extremism. She notes, "The pillars of extremism and radicalism are usually [used] to oppress women. Having more women empowered is hitting one of the pillars that support extremism."[\[cxxix\]](#) Considering the rampant instability created by extremist groups like Al-Nusra Front that have infiltrated Syria, progressive women's active role in governance is an obvious "win-win." Not only is it a vanguard against extremist elements; it is also critical to the development of a post-Assad regime that is pluralistic, democratic, stable, and peaceful.

Peace Through De-radicalization

One of the root causes of conflict in Pakistan is the radicalization of youth that is closely related to other

destabilizing issues like poverty and injustice. While the Pakistani government seems wholly unable to address these problems, Pakistani women are at the forefront of tackling these seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In doing so, they are contributing meaningfully to establishing the stability and harmony necessary to decrease the current level of violence and prevent new conflicts from occurring.

PAIMAN Alumni Trust, a Pakistani NGO that has the largest network of socially and politically active women trainers, social mobilizers and researchers across Pakistan, has confronted the process of radicalization acknowledging it as a major source of instability and conflict in the country. PAIMAN's mission is to address and eradicate the drivers of conflict: injustice, poverty, and disharmony as well as conflict itself.^[cxxx] Its "Lets Live in Peace" Program targets the process of radicalization. Female and youth peace groups called TOLANA have been established and work at the community level. Both male and female groups carry out community meetings to sensitize their respective communities on the impact of radicalization on the socio-economic fabric of the area and mobilize them to work for peace and conflict transformation. They are actively involved in negotiation and mediation in their respective areas as well.^[cxxxii]

While PAIMAN operates throughout the country, one of its focus areas is the Swat Valley of northern Pakistan, renowned for its extremist ideology. As part of the process of de-radicalization, the youth undergo psycho-social counseling along with training in life skills and livelihood skills so that they can contribute positively to their community. In addition, Huma Chughtai, a freelance consultant and a trainer for PAIMAN, uses her considerable knowledge of Sharia Law to educate on the peaceful elements of Islam in order to counter radical arguments that fuel extremism.^[cxxxiii] Aman-o-Nisa, a coalition of Pakistani women that fights violent extremism in Pakistan at the grass-roots level, also uses Islam as a means to de-radicalize young people. It presents Quranic verses -- the true interpretation, not the skewed interpretation used by the Taliban -- and examples of the life of Prophet Mohammad to show the importance of peace.^[cxxxiiii]

Another women's organization making significant inroads in combating radicalization and extremism in Pakistan is Qadims Lumiere School and College. Qadims Lumiere was founded by Bushra Hyder who serves as the director of the school. Hyder lives in Pakistan's most remote and volatile region along the border of Afghanistan—Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and consequently, has experienced first-hand the effects of increasing extremist violence in her homeland. Hyder's high school has created a peace education curriculum that teaches students about other religions and cultures, promoting compassion and understanding. Currently she has 1,000 youth in her school and has seen a noticeable reduction in the aggression that was so rampant among youth in her community. She also works with a group of mothers of her students, who have been traumatized by the death of another child and require emotional support so that they can return to being the bedrocks of their families. To help her community cope with frequent violence, she has created student "peace clubs" that visit a nearby hospital to meet with survivors of bomb attacks. She also conducts trainings with young women on leadership, conflict transformation, peace building, and microenterprise, and lobbies local government and religious officials to implement peace curricula in schools throughout the region.^[cxxxv]

Mediation

Mediation is an essential aspect of peace building. Resolving differences between warring parties requires building bridges through influence and effective dialogue. Even when a peace agreement is adopted, it is simply the first step in a long process of mediation. Injustices that occurred during the conflict must be addressed, disagreements resolved, and the drivers of conflict eliminated or at least mitigated. This requires on-going dialogue, conciliation, and negotiation.

In the Philippines, women have taken a leading role in resolving the long-running Muslim insurgency in Mindanao and have been particularly adept at mediating between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a hardline Islamist group and the Philippine government. Teresita Quintos Deles, a former teacher and women's rights and anti-poverty advocate, was appointed as the presidential adviser to the peace process by President Benigno Aquino in July, 2010. Since then, she has guided the MILF combatants and their government interlocutors towards a historic peace deal that both sides now regard as all but inevitable. Deles employs an inclusive approach ensuring that all those affected by the agreement, high and low, have ownership of the process. She notes, "As in all peace processes, there is a symbiotic relationship between the people on the ground and the negotiators. Both parties are expected to deliver on that belief. We are creating a virtuous cycle."[\[cxxxv\]](#)

Women's NGOs and civil society organizations like the Mindanao Commission on Women also play a key role in bringing about peace and stability in Mindanao since they are the connectors between different peace building tracks. Women's strong spheres of influence, especially in the arena of peace building, enable them to effectively fulfill this role.[\[cxxxvi\]](#) The National Rural Women's Coalition, for instance, works to ensure that the peace deal recognizes indigenous women's roles. Since village women traditionally acted as arbiters of domestic and community disputes, NRWC activists naturally want this function to be allowed to continue in the context of the new relationship between the MILF and the Philippine government.[\[cxxxvii\]](#)

Similarly, Somali women living Wajir, Kenya took the lead in mediating peace in this area of northeastern Kenya where anarchy reigned in the mid-1990s. Inhabited primarily by Somali exiles, Wajir district was one of the most insecure and ungoverned zones in the Horn of Africa. The Kenyan government had never established a strong presence in this isolated and impoverished frontier zone. Spillover from the Somali civil war and state collapse produced a massive flow of refugees, small arms, violent criminality, and clan tensions. Somalis living in this remote border area were left to their own to deal with the communal violence that killed thousands of residents.[\[cxxxviii\]](#)

Weary of the clan warfare and overall conflict and instability, in 1993 a group of women met at the market place and started a discussion on ways to stop the violence. The Wajir Women for Peace Group was formed out of those talks, which expanded to include other women in the town. This women's group was then joined by a group of professionals who formed the multi-clan Wajir Peace Group (WPG), with members from all clans in the district. They facilitated a meeting of clan elders from all the lineages in the district and a mediation process that culminated in the Al Fatah declaration that set out guidelines for the return of peace and future relations between the clans thereby, effectively stopping the violence.[\[cxxxix\]](#)

Recognizing that working with government entities would assist in sustaining peace and stability, the WPG later began working in partnership with Kenyan government officials and others committed to ending conflict and building peace. The result of this collaboration was the establishment of the Wajir Peace and Development Committee that included the heads of all government departments, representatives of the various peace groups, religious leaders, women, NGO representatives, traditional chiefs and security officers.[\[cxl\]](#) The success of efforts to end violence, conflict and overall instability initiated and facilitated by Somali women has been evidenced in several ways. The Wajir district of Kenya not only became much safer than before but it was arguably safer than the rest of Kenya. According to a public opinion survey conducted by Afro-barometer in 2006, its residents reported less crime and less fear of crime than any other region in the country.[\[cxli\]](#) In addition, during the post-election violence that wracked Kenya in late 2007/early 2008, the northeastern region of Kenya was quiet and stable. In the aftermath of this violence, the National Accord and Reconciliation Act of 2008 recommended the establishment of District Peace Committees everywhere acknowledging the success of

this model in northeastern Kenya.[\[cxlii\]](#)

Women as Canaries in the Coal Mine

“The United States should focus more resources on recognizing developing problems abroad.”

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, 2009[\[cxliii\]](#)

Addressing issues before they become problems is the ultimate goal in any context. In areas experiencing strife and unrest, early warning of impending conflict is even more critical. Early warning has been described as “any information from any source about escalatory developments... far enough in advance in order for a national government, or an international or regional organization, to react timely and effectively.”[\[cxliv\]](#) It should be stressed that early warning is not always about predicting conflict or episodes of violence before they have occurred. Rather, early warning information is also used to predict a resurgence or escalation of conflict and violence.[\[cxlv\]](#)

Early warning failures and under-evaluations stretch from Pearl Harbor in 1941 to the Egyptians unexpected attack across the Suez Canal in 1973; Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 to the Rwandan genocide in 1994; 9/11, Taliban attacks during the winter of 2003, the “unexpected” victory of Hamas in 2006 to violent crisis in 2008 Kenya, the coup d’état in 2008 Mauritania to the 2009 coup d’état in Honduras among many others.[\[cxlvi\]](#) Clearly, improvements in collecting information that warns of impending or escalating conflict need to be made.

Underscoring the importance of these indicators, (former) Secretary of Defense Robert Gates emphasized, “Identifying early warning signs is the foundation of “Phase Zero” operations, to include government intervention that aims to help stabilize deteriorating situations in other countries.”[\[cxlvii\]](#) Key to the planning activities that constitute Phase Zero is analyzing the situation and the operational variables in order to provide the critical information necessary to develop understanding and frame complex problems.[\[cxlviii\]](#) As noted in U.S. Army Field Manual 3-07, *Stability Operations*, “effective intelligence is essential to understanding... especially in stability operations, when efforts focus on the local populace, the host-nation government, and the security apparatus of the state.”[\[cxlix\]](#) In his article “Anticipating Crises” for the *NATO Review*, John Kriendler also stresses the importance of understanding the local context in order to be aware of early warning signs of impending crises. He notes that “knowing how and when best to become involved in an emerging crisis...requires rapidly obtaining as clear a picture of the situation as possible...”[\[cl\]](#) Only by collecting and analyzing different types of information from various sources in a community – not just hostile acts between warring factions -- can appropriate stabilization goals be determined and effective courses of action developed.

Women -- both in terms of what they do and how they are treated – are often themselves early warning indicators of conflict. Signs of approaching instability are manifested in their patterns of behavior and dress as well as changes in their treatment. In the beginning stages of instability and conflict, women are frequently the first to experience punitive treatment, being penalized for alleged transgressions either through brute force or restrictive rules.[\[cli\]](#) The types of information that women possess can also be indicators of future unrest. In many instances they are aware of combatant recruitment practices, locations of combatants, and the movement and caching of arms and other conflict-related supplies all of which point to impending violence and conflict. Experts interviewing women in conflict zones have identified women’s experiences and perceptions as an under-utilized set of resources to prevent deadly conflict and its resurgence.[\[clii\]](#) As potential “canaries in the coal mine,” women living in areas of conflict and

instability are a chief source of critical early warning information.

Daily Routines

Indicators of potential conflict can be visible in the routines of women's daily existence. High tech surveillance and intelligence collection methods are not always the best tools to forecast conflict. In fact, the signs of potential conflict may be as obvious as the operating time of markets, the price of a gun, and whether children are attending school. A UN assessment[[cliii](#)] on the impact of armed conflict on women and their role in peace building included interviews of women who had experienced the effects of armed conflict. Their comments revealed how everyday routines indicated the degree of conflict in their communities. One woman in Sierra Leone stated, "As the war was brewing, women were up and about very early in the morning, getting all of their business done as quickly as possible. The markets were only open for a few hours because people were afraid. When the market was open for longer, it was a sign that things were getting back to normal." According to another woman in Burundi, "In the morning, if we see women coming down from the mountain, then we know it is safe to send our children to school. If we don't see women, we know that something may happen. They have been sent back by the men for a reason, and it is very possible that it is not safe."[\[cliv\]](#)

Knowledge of Weapons and Combat Operations

The UN assessment referenced earlier also pointed out that women frequently possess important knowledge about weapons, combat operations, and other information related to conflict that is overlooked. Because women are usually seen as victims of conflict who are unaware of combat operations and other violent acts, they generally have nowhere to turn with their information. The report related the following story. Zlata, a woman living in Kosovo, had seen arms caches growing in early 1998 and realized that armed conflict was imminent. But she had no one to tell and doubted that her concerns would be taken seriously. "At a certain point, the boys - young men I suppose, my own nephew also - went up into the hills and got trained," she said. "That was the beginning. Then there were guns, first only some, which is usual, but then a lot of weapons being talked about. I didn't see them, but I heard about them. We knew all this, but still nobody was watching or listening to us in Kosovo."[\[clv\]](#)

The same is true of women in Afghanistan. A U.S. Army Female Engagement Team (FET) member who worked in the eastern provinces of Ghazni and Paktika noted that Afghan women were aware of where supply kits for insurgents were stored in the family compounds. These supply kits consisted of bags filled with clothing, wire, other materials, and instructions for making bombs. Afghan women were also known to hide sensitive information like photos of insurgents and lists of their names. In discussions with one Afghan woman, the FET also learned that a local madrassa was being used to train children as spotters. This was especially critical information for the army unit responsible for the area since no one expected a child to serve as a spotter and as such potentially be directly in the line of fire.[\[clvi\]](#)

In Sierra Leone, a young woman said that in her village, "[W]e knew roughly where and when the RUF (Revolutionary United Front; the rebel force) were planning something big against the peacekeepers. My friend and I, we wanted to tell someone, but it was hard, we were watched, it would take a long time to walk in the night, and it was dangerous. It was a big pity too, because the RUF took the guns and the pride of the UN that day, but it took our hope too. We were scared again, which is exactly what they wanted."[\[clvii\]](#)

These accounts are samples of the potential reservoir of experience and insight that women have about weapons accumulation and conflict proliferation, principal signs of impending conflict. Women regularly know about the location of arms caches, the routes used to transport them, and the social changes brought about by an influx of guns.[\[clviii\]](#) Like men's knowledge, women's knowledge about preparation for

combat operations and terrorist attacks is equally valuable and if tapped, could provide the warning necessary to effectively counter or prevent future attacks.

Targeted Mistreatment

One method for gaining an edge in a situation of conflict is to instill fear in local populations. This serves as a primary tool of insurgents, terrorists, and others vying for control. Women tend to be the first targets for abuse in these campaigns of fear since targeting women serves a dual purpose. It intimidates the population and dishonors families since women's safety and well being are generally considered fundamental to the honor of the entire family. In societies that have a strong honor-shame culture or where women are considered property, violent acts against women may be committed in order to punish, demoralize and symbolically defeat men. Given that women are usually seen as bearers of culture, whom men have to defend, attacks on women may also function as a proxy to attacking the culture of an entire society.^[clix] Common forms of abuse include forced marriage, sexual harassment and abuse, punishment for assumed transgressions, involuntary conscription, and having their movements curtailed.

Forced Marriage and Rape

Forcing women into marriage with combatants is a common practice in areas experiencing conflict. The Salafi-jihadist militant group al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is well known for this tactic. According to the UN, the jihadist influx in Mali has been particularly **brutal for women**, noting that many have been raped or forced into marriage and prostitution.^[clx] “The number of enforced marriages is increasing; the price to buy a wife is less than \$1,000,” stated a senior UN human rights official. The women, once forcefully married, are often married off to other men after a very short while by their so-called husbands which is a smokescreen for enforced prostitution and rapes.^[clxi]

During the conflict between the ruling National Liberation Front [Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN)] and armed Islamist groups in the 1990s, Algerian women were also forced into marriage by armed groups. The Armed Islamic Group [Group Islamique Arme (GIA)], in particular, abused women in this manner. It conducted a program of abducting women with the aim of forcing them into temporary pleasure marriages with fighters. Women who refused were held against their will and recurrently forced to clean and cook for militant groups, raped, and in some cases murdered.^[clxii] Gang rapes by armed groups during this period of conflict in Algeria occurred so frequently that despite the severe societal taboo of discussing sexuality, many women reported these attacks to the police and gave interviews with newspapers providing accounts of months of captivity and repeated rapes by armed men.^[clxiii]

The Bosnian war also set the stage for women to be forcibly married, raped, and impregnated by groups competing for power in the region. Serbian forces raped Bosnian women in order to weaken Bosnian resistance by humiliating and demoralizing them. They further forcibly impregnated these women so that they would bear “Serbian” children thereby diluting the Bosnian culture and strengthening the Serbian culture. As part of this type of ethnic cleansing, Bosnian women were imprisoned until their children were born to ensure that the pregnancy was not terminated.^[clxiv] The Serbs were not alone in using women to achieve their ultimate ends in the region. Starting in 2000, Islamic sources in Europe reported on Iranian and Saudi operatives spreading influence in Bosnia by marrying local women, frequently by force.^[clxv]

Increased Restrictions and Physical Abuse

Forced marriage and sexual abuse of women can serve as early warning indicators of underlying as well as escalating conflict, but other advanced warning signs exist as well. Women are also frequently mistreated physically and have their freedoms restricted by groups competing for power as a means to instill fear in and, more importantly, control entire societies.

A shift in women's roles from more open to more closed can signal an overall move towards repression and potential conflict. The tighter imposition of Sharia law in Pakistan, for instance, and an increasing number of honor killings could be considered a precursor to the restrictive interpretation of laws and a shift towards a more general conservatism in society, threatening stability as it clashes with more secular currents.[\[clxvi\]](#) In this vein, religious extremism in Pakistan continues to increase restrictions on women's and girls' lives. Extremist groups have banned girls' education declaring it a "western conspiracy" and more than 300 girls' schools have been burned, destroyed or closed down by local Taliban in Swat Valley. Women have also been banned from markets and shops.[\[clxvii\]](#) By restricting women's and girls' freedom to be in public space and also receive an education, extremists are signaling an increase in their power. This also could also serve as a warning of further violence for anyone who resists them.

The struggle between secularists and Islamist extremists in Timbuktu, Mali was also played out most directly in the lives of women. Timbuktu endured occupation by [al-Qaeda](#) in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in early 2013 and as such, became the unlikely test bed for the world that Osama bin Laden's followers wished to create. The women of Timbuktu were singled out for special persecution and restrictions. Their punitive treatment was the first indication of an impending escalation in conflict that resulted in armed combat. They were beaten with whips and sticks for assorted transgressions including failing to cover their faces in public, having photos of pop stars on their cell phones, and allegedly having affairs. Extremist Islamists also compiled lists of women who had children out of wedlock, or who were unmarried and pregnant. The lists were seen as an indication of these women's imminent risk of being subjected to cruel and inhumane punishment. AQIM's strict application of Islamic Sharia law also prevented women from going to work since they are denied the right to work under a restrictive application of Islamic law.[\[clxviii\]](#) Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ivan Šimonovic noted that "[w]omen are the primary victims of the current crisis and have been disproportionately affected by the situation in the north...Their human rights to employment, education and access to basic social services have been seriously curtailed." [\[clxix\]](#)

During the conflict in Algeria between Islamists and the national government, women, again, were a primary target of harsh treatment. The Islamists harassed women in a variety of ways including restricting their freedom of movement. Women who worked outside of the home, for instance, were threatened with violence by the Islamists since they were perceived as acting contrary to Islam. Women's college and university dormitories were also besieged by FIS militants who threatened women residents and prevented them from entering or leaving.[\[clxx\]](#)

In Afghanistan, where progress towards security and stability is declining as international forces and organizations prepare to leave in 2014, [\[clxxi\]](#) Afghan women serve as the bellwether for increased repression and conflict in the country. They are being systematically targeted with threats and the use of violence. A 2012 ActionAid report[\[clxxii\]](#) on the status of Afghan women's rights notes that "[v]iolence against women remains endemic in Afghanistan, with attacks on women becoming more frequent as tension grows in the run up to NATO troop withdrawal." Women are abducted, beaten, tortured and have death threats made against them. Women who enter public life are the more likely targets of extremists and face assassination attempts that can be deadly.[\[clxxiii\]](#) Some of the female professionals who have been killed include a member of the provincial parliament of Kandahar, government ministers, journalists, women's rights activists, international NGO workers, and even the highest-ranking policewoman of Kandahar.[\[clxxiv\]](#)

In addition to assassination attempts, insurgent groups targeting women send them threatening night letters [\[clxxv\]](#) on a massive scale. Scenes of rape are also passed on to women anonymously via mobile phones as bulk mail or sent to specific women.[\[clxxvi\]](#)

Disagreement between religious conservatives and moderates in Afghanistan is also being played out in women's lives as evidenced by increasing attempts to control their freedom of movement and define appropriate female behavior. In March 2012, Afghanistan's top religious council released a statement outlining the rights and duties of women under Islam. It said that women should not mix with men in school, work, or other aspects of daily life. The Ulema Council also stated that women should not travel without a male relative.[\[clxxvii\]](#) In line with this oppressive trend, last year in Mazar-i-Sharif, the religious council of the famous Blue Mosque, one of the few places where women are able to socialize in public, banned women from its weekly meetings.[\[clxxviii\]](#) The current increase in both restrictions on women and violence and threats against them is a chilling reminder of like events that signaled the Taliban's consolidation of power in the mid-1990's.

Women's Dress

A change in women's dress can also serve as a key warning signal of an increase in the power of insurgent or other groups supporting conservatism and/or extremism. On the flip side, it can also be a harbinger of secular movements gaining ground in contested territory.

After the bombing of the al-Askari mosque -- one of the holiest sites in Shia Islam -- in Samarra, Iraq in February 2006, there was a tremendous spike in violence and repressive measures. Over the next few days following the bombing, more than 1,000 people were killed in retaliatory violence. Shootings, robberies, and other attacks were an every day occurrence. This high level of conflict continued throughout 2006 and into 2007. In order to assess the level of influence of repressive elements and thereby protect themselves and family members, Iraqi women began to pay attention to how many women in public spaces like markets were wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf). In a secular urban area like Baghdad, it was uncommon for women to wear the hijab before the 2003 invasion. Consequently, an increase in the number of women wearing a headscarf indicated that tyrannical militias had extended their control over a particular neighborhood, and suggested the potential for increased sectarian violence.

[\[clxxix\]](#)

Pakistan, a politically unstable country that al Qaeda and the Taliban also call home, has been drifting toward religious militancy since the 1980s.[\[clxxx\]](#) The increased destabilization resulting from this religious militancy has been especially conspicuous in women's dress. In essence, Pakistani women's attire serves as the "frontlines" of the struggle between secular and extremist religious groups. In the Northwest Frontier province, for example, a strict dress code for women has been imposed by the Taliban. Women must be fully covered, from head to toe. Even girls of eight or nine have to follow the dress code. Those who fail to comply suffer harassment and abuse. Labour Party member, Bushra Khaliq, notes that a "Burka culture was promoted and women were pushed inside the four walls of the house" as a result of the increasing power and influence of religious extremists. Dictating women's dress is one way that they have consolidated their socio-political spaces in the country.[\[clxxxii\]](#)

During the conflict between the Algerian national government and armed Islamist groups in the 1990s, women's behavior, dress and conduct became the focus of the Islamist agenda. A slogan that appeared during Ramadan 1994 warned, "O you woman who wears the jilbab (full robes), May you be blessed by God. O you who wears the hijab (head scarf), May God put you on the straight road. O you who expose yourself, the gun is for you."[\[clxxxiii\]](#) Highlighting the prominence of women's dress as an indicator of conflict between warring groups during this period is the fact that while Algerian women were killed by Islamists for not wearing the veil, a secular group called the Organization of Young Free Algerians (OJAL) promised to kill 20 veiled women for each unveiled woman murdered.[\[clxxxiii\]](#) In fact, OJAL carried through on its threat in part by killing two women for wearing the veil.

Somali Islamists, like other groups vying for power through fear and violence, also focus on women's dress in order to intimidate the populace and exert control over them. They have publicly whipped women for wearing bras since this garment is viewed as "western" and hence, contrary to Islam. Somalis claimed that gunmen had rounded up any woman seen with a firm bust and then had them publicly whipped by masked men. The women were then told to remove their bras and shake their breasts. "Al Shabaab forced us to wear their type of veil and now they order us to shake our breasts," stated a woman named Halima, adding that her daughters had been whipped on Thursday. "They first banned the former veil and introduced a hard fabric which stands stiffly on women's chests. They are now saying that breasts should be firm naturally, or just flat."[\[clxxxiv\]](#)

In Bosnia Herzegovina, women's change in dress during and after the war also served as an indication of competing interests, instability, and social unrest. The capital Sarajevo, for example, had been a secular city whose Muslim residents did not define themselves by their religion and were tolerant of their Catholic and Serbian Orthodox neighbors. When the internal conflict began in the 1990s, a change in women's dress became noticeable. A Bosnian journalist asserted, "Never before in Bosnia have we seen women moving about in the hijab [Islamic headdress]." While women wearing the hijab was new, equally surprising was the appearance of Bosnian women in Sarajevo donning the chador (a garment that envelops the body from head to foot and covers all or part of the face). This change in dress was the result of Saudis pressuring Bosnian widows of those killed in the civil war to convert to Wahabi Islam.[\[clxxxv\]](#) Altering women's dress was part of a movement to strengthen Islam in the Balkans. It also pointed to the existence of Muslim extremists from other countries serving as combatants in Bosnia and their influence on the local population.

Afghan women's maltreatment by the Taliban was an early and overt sign of the degree to which the Taliban used violence and repression to control the population, especially women, and also how it intended to govern the country. Forced to wear the burqa, prevented from receiving an education or working outside of the home, and barred from being in public without a male family member as an escort, Afghan women symbolized Islamic extremist oppression. The ubiquitous blue burqa came to epitomize Afghan women and, in turn, the repressive influence of the Taliban.

While the burqa was a leading indicator of the Taliban's destabilizing and extremist influence during its reign, Afghan women's dress continues to serve as a bellwether of the country's stability. More than 10 years of democratic governance has contributed to a shift in women's appearance, predominantly in urban areas. While virtually all Afghan women living in Kabul and other urban areas still wear the hijab with slacks or long skirts and fashionable blouses, wearing a burqa is no longer a requirement. In fact, a recent news report noted that women's less conservative outfits have resulted in a decline in burqa sales in Kabul with some traders going bust.[\[clxxxvi\]](#)

Conclusion

When planning to engage in combat, commanders want to know who the enemy is as well as his strategy, resources, location, and tactics, techniques and procedures for executing the fight. Commanders aren't satisfied with knowing and understanding only 50% of the actors on the battlefield. Oddly enough, when tackling insurgencies, terrorism and other forms of irregular warfare, military commanders – as well as their civilian counterparts -- seem to be satisfied with only half the picture.

Failing to recognize that women play meaningful roles in each phase of conflict -- early warning, combat, and stabilization -- restricts military and political leaders' ability to understand the complexity of conflict. Since in-depth situational understanding of conflict forms the basis for strategies calculated to achieve the desired end state of peace and stability, substandard situational awareness naturally hinders this process

from the start. And it goes on to skew operations and tactics throughout the entire stabilization process.

If stability operations is to achieve the ultimate objective of establishing sustainable peace, it would behoove those conducting them to acknowledge that the continuum of conflict involves all members of society including women, men, girls, and boys. The general practice of ignoring or marginalizing women's contributions – both negative and positive – is something that we can no longer afford to do. Recent stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan failed to earnestly incorporate women into the operational picture thereby missing numerous opportunities to 1) weaken insurgent and terrorist movements, and 2) strengthen governance and foster a lasting peace. To avoid repeating these mistakes, senior leaders might first enhance their own understanding of conflict and the multiple actors involved in it – to include women's roles as hawks, doves and canaries. By doing so, they can ensure that future stability operations will be conducted in a manner that addresses the reality on the ground rather than the prevailing, but flawed, notion of conflict by, with, and through men alone.

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[xviii] Susan McKay, “Girls as ‘weapons of terror’ in Northern Ugandan and Sierra Leone armed groups” in *Female Terrorism and Militancy*, ed. Cindy D. Ness. (Canada: Routledge, 2008): 167.

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[xcvii] The European Platform is an open network of approximately 150 European NGOs involved in conflict prevention and/or resolution in the international arena.

[xcviii] For a complete list of countries with UNSCR 1325 NAPs, see <http://www.peacewomen.org/naps/list-of-naps>

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