EN(COUNTERING) TERRORISM

Date: November 23, 2022

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KEY EVENTS

On November 23, 2022, Dr. Mia Bloom, Communications and Middle East Studies professor at Georgia State University, presented on "En(countering) Terrorism" at the 2022 Annual CASIS Vancouver West Coast Security Conference. The key points discussed were the changing roles of women in terrorist groups, the relationship between social media and terrorist groups, and the emergence of the QAnon movement.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Bloom presented her research and findings on the roles of women and social media usage across several terrorist groups, drawing on her 35 years of experience in the field of terrorism studies. The second half of the presentation discussed the QAnon conspiracy theory and Dr. Bloom's insights regarding the rhetoric and the role of terrorism in the movement.

BACKGROUND

Dr. Bloom began by discussing women in terrorist groups, noting how the role of women has changed to include more active participation and coordination, though this varies across and within groups. In the past, the face of jihadi terrorism had been typically male, but Dr. Bloom pointed to research that shows women are now on the front lines of terrorism—for example, 54% of suicide bombers in Boko Haram were female. She then discussed the motives behind this increased inclusion of women, such as the expanded ability of groups to avoid detection, greater access to civilian targets, and generating more press and public attention for the extremist group. She also noted that based on her interviews with terrorist leaders, women might be more easily manipulated or used to goad men into joining terrorist groups. Women also provide access to the exploitation of

female-only phenomena, such as concealing an improvised explosive device (IED) as a late term pregnancy.

Dr. Bloom touched on the "5 Rs" for women's motivations for joining such groups: redemption, revenge, respect, relationship, and rape. Though, she stated that women's desire to prove their ideological dedication to the groups is equal to their male counterparts. Dr. Bloom highlighted gender-based violence as a factor used to effectively and forcibly recruit women, noting that jihadi groups weaponise rape as a means of coercion. Women who are victims of rape in traditional communities can be considered societal outcasts, and jihadist groups can exploit the honour code to coerce women into joining.

Dr. Bloom discussed the topic of extremist messaging and disinformation, stating that groups often glamorise recruitment and participation; for example, ISIS reportedly recruited women with the promise of Nutella and kittens. Social media was and still is a prominent recruitment tool as well, with female notions of empowerment being disseminated. For example, ISIS propaganda posted images of female members driving as a means of appealing to women in Saudi Arabia, attempting to demonstrate that ISIS women had greater independence than would be available locally where the kingdom still outlawed the practice.

Dr. Bloom noted the presence of children in group messaging, stating that ISIS used children in over 75% of propaganda. Multiracial and foreign children were emphasised, although unlike local children who were photographed and deployed, foreign fighter children were used over and over -- giving the audience the impression they were watching the child grow up in real time like the Richard Linklater film, Boyhood. Dr. Bloom also pointed to the use of children as foreign fighters, resulting in many being deserted in open air prisons after they no longer serve the group's function. Though some children are repatriated by their countries, thousands more are left behind. Finding a solution to this issue has been a focus of the research community, including Dr. Bloom and her colleagues at Boston Children's Hospital.

In the second half of her presentation, Dr. Bloom discussed QAnon, a conspiracy theory born online that centres on the premise that a global cabal of democratic and Hollywood elites engage in the trafficking of children. Dr. Bloom suggested that QAnon is not a substantial terrorist threat and noted that subscribers are more likely dangerous to themselves than pose a security threat, so it is best not to exaggerate the threat. She indicated, however, that there were a notable number of American primary candidates who ran on the QAnon platform in 2020, raising concern regarding the movement's presence in congressional politics. In

response to the mainstreaming of QAnon beliefs, California-based social media companies sought to deplatform QAnon, to which members responded by using camouflaged language to avoid detection—a tactic ISIS successfully used in the past.

Dr. Bloom discussed the use of race as a means of inciting outrage among followers of QAnon, noting the frequent targeting of critical race theory (CRT) by the group and by some conservative political figures. A common image in QAnon "save the children" propaganda displays a white child with a black or brown hand covering their mouth, furthering a narrative of racial divide and white oppression which dates back to reconstruction era (post-civil war) tropes of the "Black Brute". Despite this rhetoric, most victims of child trafficking are non-white.

Dr. Bloom concluded her presentation by explaining that QAnon can be a "bottomless rabbit hole" for disillusioned individuals, namely those who perceive their beliefs as being challenged in the social domain. The movement acts as a manufactured safe space for members to air grievances, as well as provide members with the notion that they possess the answers to perceived societal ills. Despite the growing success of the conspiracy theory, Dr. Bloom cautioned against the danger of engaging in "panic porn" whereby think tanks, researchers, and policy makers exaggerate the security threat posed by QAnon or other groups such as incels. There is a tendency among the media and members of the public to induce moral panic regarding QAnon through exaggerated threat reports as a means of capturing institutional and public attention. Though QAnon does not pose a substantial terrorist threat, Dr. Bloom emphasised the danger of QAnon and intersectionality, stating that there is increased threat when a subscriber belongs to multiple extremist factions—for example QAnon and the Proud Boys.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Roles of women in terrorism have shifted with more women having active and leadership roles within groups. Women have various motives to join terrorist groups but can also be coerced using shame and gender-based violence, as exhibited in Jihadi groups.
- Terrorist groups increasingly use social media sources to recruit members, recently creating targeted propaganda leveraging women and multiracial children.
- Children used as foreign fighters have been languishing in open-air prisons; however, research is being developed to combat this and repatriate children to their respective nations.

- The success of QAnon can partially be attributed to the movement acting as a supportive space for people whose beliefs have been challenged and unfrozen in certain social domain such as belief in science, gender roles, trust in government institutions, providing members with the notion that they possess the answers to perceived societal ills.
- The threat of QAnon is amplified in public discourse using "panic porn", but the terrorist threat of the group is low. However, this threat can increase if there is intersectional membership in QAnon and other extremist groups such as militias, the racist right, or veterans.