Beyond Gender Norms and Role Expectations:

Revising Counterterrorism Strategies in Iraq and Jordan.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation will analyse the phenomenon of female terrorism in Arab Muslim societies, and the consequent national strategies aimed at countering it. Scholars have recently focused on the gendered aspects of jihadi terrorist organisations, looking at both the motivations behind women's radicalisation and their operational roles, particularly as suicide bombers. Yet, little attention has been paid to the operativity of gendered norms in informing female terrorists' identity and agency, leading toward biased and partial understandings of the issue at hand. As such, this study will first focus on examining female jihadi terrorism from a gender-based and context-sensitive perspective, and it will then check national counterterrorism efforts against those findings. The purpose of this research is to highlight the modalities and the extent to which gendered norms informing female behaviour have been integrated into counterterrorism apporaches. A qualitative research design will be adopted, analysing terrorist women's first-hand accounts and lived experiences and evaluating Iraq's and Jordan's National Action Plans on Women Peace and Security. Findings will show that female terrorism has been evolving in the past two decades, not distancing itself from gendered religious values, but rather re-signifying their applications in the realm of terrorism. It will be argued that, tied to previous understandings of gendered societal beliefs, and not envisioning women's identity and agency as they currently are operating in terrorist organisations, national counterterrorism strategies are not fit for adequately tackling female terrorism. The dissertation has both theoretical and policy-relevant implications, generating knowledge in an often-neglected area of female terrorism, and highlighting the gaps and consequences of biased counterterrorism efforts.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
CSTF	Cross-Sector Task Force
CTS	Critical Terrorism Studies
INAP	Iraq National Action Plan
IPT	Interpretive Process Tracing
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
I-WISH	Iraq Woman Integrated Social and Health Survey
IWN	Iraqi Women Network
JNCW	Jordanian National Commission for Women
JONAP	Jordan National Action Plan
NAP	National Action Plan
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
US	United States
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

INTRODUCTION

Feminine values and ideals have been historically and politically informing the conceptualisation of womanhood, defining female characters as inherently peaceful and caring, never perpetuating violence themselves, and in need of protection and saving (e.g., Hasan, 2002). These gendered portrayals, however, fall short of providing satisfactory understandings of women's real agency in violent environments, and in particular in the space of terrorism. Most visibly, women have escaped those gendered stereotypes and definitions by embodying new identities as suicide bombers (Erez and Laster, 2020). Although less covered in the academia and even more so in international media, women have now become fully active agents of terror, playing central roles and carrying out wide-ranging activities beyond martyrdom (see Berko and Erez, 2007; Bloom 2007; Khelgat-Doost, 2021; von Knop, 2008).

Most of the research field on the issue suffers from gendered biases, and struggles to recognise and provide explanations for the rise and the modalities of female terrorism. In fact, while scholarship has extensively analysed women's roles in terrorist organisations as mothers and wives, or on the front-lines as suicide bombers (see Bloom, 2007; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2011), little attention has been paid to examining women's terrorist agency in all of its forms, beyond the extremes of passively submitting to male terrorists, or of willingly sacrificing their lives in terrorist activities. Even more so, research on female terrorism in the Middle East fails to represent the phenomenon in its context- and gender-sensitive aspects, as the area study is additionally hindered by orientalist views and patriarchal understandings of gendered norms, according to which women's agency is inevitably defined and regulated

by values such as piety, modesty, and respectability (Abu-Lughod, 1986). Moreover, women are described as completely subjected to their male relatives, and as naïve victims in need of Western saving (Abu-Lughod, 2013). While it is acknowledged that in many cases jihadi terrorism has resorted to gender- and sexual-based violence to force women into terrorist organisations, and coerce them to adapt, follow, and obey the groups' rules and ideologies, it should also be noted that there is a significant fraction of Arab women who voluntarily and rationally decide to become members of terrorist organisations, not in spite of, but by virtue of societal gendered values (see Rumman and Hanieh, 2017). As a consequence of these misconceptions and biases, the practical responses to the rise of female terrorism have lacked "the integration of gender perspective during design, implementation and review processes" (Patel and Westermann, 2018: 55), and have suffered from not adapting to the changing nature of female militants' roles in terrorist organisations.

As the phenomenon is overshadowed by Western biases and by traditional understandings of gendered norms, it is of no surprise that little information is available regarding Arab women's identity and agency within terrorist organisations, how they have evolved through time, how they coexist with gendered values, and if and how they have been integrated into national counterterrorism strategies. These gaps in the literature require studies from interdisciplinary approaches, revealing how female terrorism and societal gendered norms mutually inform each other. Therefore, this dissertation will shine a light on an often minimised and overlooked issue, seeking to produce theoretical insights on women's self-understandings as terrorist agents, and its intersections with societal gendered beliefs. In addition, by examining national counterterrorism measures, it will evaluate Arab States' responses and thus generate policy implications. As such, the value of this research

does not solely rely on academic purposes and on the production of new non-biased knowledge, but it is also policy-relevant for the development of gender-sensitive, context-based counterterrorism strategies.

Based on the explained relevancy, the dissertation has a double focus on female terrorism and the consequent counterterrorism efforts, examining the issues at hand through gendered lenses and taking into account its contextual uniqueness. The study will address the following research question: To what extent are gendered and religious norms in Arab, Muslim societies taken into consideration when addressing female terrorism in counterterrorism strategies? In order to answer properly, the research will examine the question in two different sections, thus first generating knowledge on two separate levels, and subsequently evaluating how they both inform each other. First, it provides insights into the characteristics of female jihadism in Arab Muslim societies and its dynamic nature, analysing women's self-portrayed identities and agency, and how they have evolved alongside gendered norms. As such, it will be possible to identify whether terrorist women have shattered or reinforced those societal norms regulating their behaviour. This first step of the analysis is necessary both to depict today's reality of female terrorism and its intersection with gendered norms, and to provide the ground for evaluating the modalities in which counterterrorism approaches have addressed the phenomenon, whether through traditional and patriarchal understandings, or through a current and realistic portrayal of female militants' roles and identities. The dissertation, by analysing national counterterrorism approaches, will then generate insights on how societal gendered norms have informed the concept of womanhood adopted by those strategies, and how they have been integrated into the resulting practical efforts tackling female terrorism. Consequently, it will be possible to determine the extent to which Arab States' counterterrorism approaches have been built around

gendered norms, and secondly, whether those norms and values correspond to the ones currently informing women's identities and roles in terrorist organisations, thus answering the mentioned research question.

This dissertation will address the research question through a qualitative research design, adopting different research methods for the two sub-sections. The intersection between the phenomenon of female terrorism and traditional gendered norms will be analysed through the method of interpretive process tracing, examining women's first-hand accounts of their experiences and their understandings related to being agents of terror. Besides, the modalities in which national counterterrorism strategies have taken into consideration the same societal gendered beliefs will be assessed through the method of comparative case studies, focusing namely on the States of Iraq and Jordan, and their National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security. The comparison will be carried out through a focused structured technique, with the adoption of a feminist policy analysis framework.

Following this introductory section, the dissertation will present a literature review and a theoretical framework in Chapter 1. Academic debates and scholarship's understandings relating to the operativity of gendered norms in Arab, Muslim societies, how they impact women's agency and their influences on female terrorism, will be reviewed in detail. The theoretical underpinnings of the study will then be introduced, focusing on the definition of terrorism and counterterrorism, and how the concept of agency is hereby understood and applied to the field of female terrorism.

Subsequently, Chapter 2 is dedicated to the explanations and justification of the qualitative research design, and the chosen research methods of interpretive process tracing and comparative case studies,

highlighting their advantages and pitfalls. In addition, the chapter will also address the ethical considerations concerning the dissertation and its limitations.

In Chapter 3, the first section of the empirical analysis will be carried out. The phenomenon of female terrorism will be analysed through terrorist women's first-hand accounts and testimonies of their lived experiences, with the aim of tracing how evolving applications of gendered norms have informed women's evolving positions within terrorist organisations.

Subsequently, Chapter 4 will focus on Iraq's and Jordan's counterterrorism efforts, analysing from a gendered perspective their respective National Action Plans implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, highlighting how these strategies have portrayed women, and if and how they have addressed female terrorism.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, the findings from the previous sections will be reported and linked together, checking dominant views on womanhood and female militants present in counterterrorism approaches against today's reality of female terrorism. The results will then be discussed, drawing conclusions and implications related both to the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies and their impacts on terrorist women's strategic advantages.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will present a detailed review of the current literature addressing the operativity of gendered norms in Arab, Muslim societies and their impacts on the collectively shared concept of womanhood, particularly in the field of terrorism. The theoretical foundations of the dissertation will also be introduced, providing the hereby adopted definitions for the concepts of terrorism, counterterrorism, and agency. The purpose of this section is to highlight the gaps in the scholarship surrounding the issue of female terrorism and their implications, as well as to provide the theoretical ground upon which the research will be then built.

1.1 Reviewing Gendered Norms, Women, and Terrorism

Women in the Middle East have been portrayed through orientalist lenses[1] as oppressed, passive, and without real agency, often linking their subalternate status to the role Islam plays in the region (e.g., Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Price, 2015). The Western assumptions related to the intersection of gender and Islam have further been crystallised in the aftermath of September 11, and have produced and strengthened additional stereotypes and misunderstandings of women's roles in Middle Eastern societies (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Ilkkaracan, 2008; Mahmood, 2005; Pratt, 2012). However, over the past two decades,

[1] Orientalism is a concept first introduced by Edward Said in 1978, and it refers to the biased and politically-driven Western production of knowledge concerning the Orient. The concept underlines how Western knowledge has been based on the existential differences between the "East" and the "West", and it has reinforced the vision of Middle Eastern societies as weak, disorganised, degenerated, and ultimately inferior and dependent on Western societies.

scholars have focused on challenging and dismantling the misconceptions related to the intersection between Islam and women (Charrad, 2011). As such, it will presented the current state of scholarship concerning gendered norms in Arab Muslim societies, their foundations and the impact they have had on women's agency. The distorted reality created around gender and Islam has also been translated in terrorism studies, in which Arab women have been mostly addressed as mothers, sisters, and wives; almost always as passive victims and hardly never as perpetrators of violence (e.g., Lahoud, 2014). Yet, in recent years, the participation of women in jihadi terrorist organisations has increased, and the roles they have undertaken have expanded, balancing their agency with the preservation of conservative Islamic values (Abdellatif and Ottaway, 2007; Laster and Erez, 2015). Hence, the literature on women in Jihadist terrorist organisations will also be reviewed.

1.1.1 Gendered Norms in Arab Muslim Societies

Customs, traditions, and social imperatives are at the heart of the norms imposed on and internalised by subjects, constituting the foundations of one's interiority and agency (Mahmood, 2005). Similarly to any other society, Arab Muslim ones have built through the years a code of unwritten norms, regulating the appropriate and expected behaviour of each individual in the community. Those norms are both based on Islamic religious beliefs and practices, and on the political processes each country has undergone (El Said, Meari, and Pratt, 2015). Therefore, even though there is no unique, universal set of rules valid for the entire Arab Muslim world, there are still common elements that are truthful across the region. Academia has discussed at length how social norms have defined women's behaviour in Arab Muslim

societies. Yet, the mainstream discourse on the matter has often produced and reproduced stereotypes and misrepresentations that are not consistent with the reality of women's agency.

At the basis of the religious norms and practices that currently determine the appropriate female behaviour and values in the region, is the concept of *fitna*. *Fitna* is understood as the "disorder arising from uncontrolled lust and illicit sexual interactions" (Tucker, 2008: 179), and it is believed to disrupt the normal fulfilment of religious obligations (*Ibidem*). Thus, tasked with the duty of minimising the damages related to the unregulated sexual interactions between men and women, Islamic jurists have delineated rules aimed at controlling sexuality in shared social spaces (Adang, 2002). Although women *per se* do not represent the triggering cause for *fitna*, it is them who are entrusted with the duty of countering it, by respecting social norms, and by upholding the values and the bodily conduct formulated by jurists (El Said, Meari, and Pratt, 2015). In fact, women are taught to behave according to the feminine virtue of *al-haya*. *Al-haya* is defined as being "diffident, modest, and able to feel and enact shyness" (Mahmood, 2005: 156). The practice of this Islamic value is both internalised in one's subjectivity, and externalised in social practices, for instance through veiling or through the creation of separated social places for abiding by religious obligations (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Tucker, 2008).

Despite the weight of the Islamic jurists' influence, and not underestimating the impact it had on women's subjectivity and agency, it would be erroneous to consider the religious sphere the only foundation on which gendered norms were formed in Arab Muslim societies. In fact, based on the ideology and impacts of anticolonial nationalist movements across the region, women's bodies have become the sites for building national identities, and gendered norms have been

translated outside the religious sphere and crystallised in the societies (Charrad, 2011; El Said, Meari, and Pratt, 2015; Pratt, 2020). During the anti-colonial struggles and in the state-building processes, norms regulating women's agency in the public and political sphere were formulated, excluding or allowing female presence in social spaces based on its conformation with the qualities of modesty and respectability. Scholarship has indeed outlined how women's bodies were both charged with the duty of representing the nation in opposition to the colonising West, and in function of the Islamic virtue of *al-haya*, (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009; Badran, 2009; Charrad, 2011; Pratt, 2020). It is based on these regulations of their agency that patriarchal hierarchies were established at the heart of post-colonial states.

To reiterate, the Islamic virtues of modesty, shyness, and docility were at the basis of the religious and political regulations of women's bodies. Scholars have uncovered and understood those social norms through the framing binaries of honour/shame and public/private. Academia has in fact described Arab, Muslim societies as based on the honour-shame cultural mentality (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 2013; Haddad and Esposito, 1997; Shirazi, 2009). As such, women are expected to act honourably – i.e., according to the parameters of social morality, and displaying modesty, piety, and shyness (Abu-Lughod, 1986). On the contrary, displaying non-dignified, unchaste behaviour and crossing the socially defined moral boundaries, would entail bringing shame both on the woman, and on her entire family. Women's behaviour is indeed strictly associated to their families' and most importantly to their male relatives' honour, as a direct consequence of the patriarchal family structure (El Said, Meari, and Pratt, 2015; Moghadam, 2010). As such, in case of female shameful behaviour, "men will question the manhood of her father and brothers, and until the issue is resolved, the family members will have to walk in public with their eyes lowered in shame"

(Shirazi, 2009: 33). When analysing the binary of honour/shame, literature has focused particularly on the phenomenon of the honour crimes. An honour crime is defined as “the killing of a woman by her relatives for violation of a sexual code in the name of restoring family honour” (Abu-Lughod, 2013: 113). However, being a rather sensitive subject, scholars and international organisations have analysed the phenomenon from Orientalist perspectives. Far from legitimising such practice, not taking into account how honour and shame are interiorised and are a fundamental component of Arab Muslim societies, can only result in partial analyses. For instance, it is not correct, and it would underestimate women’s roles in their communities, sustaining that “honour killings are based on the belief […] of women as objects and commodities, not as human beings endowed with dignity and rights equal to those of men” (Amnesty International, 2005).

Because of the centrality of the honour-shame complex across the Arab Muslim world, gendered norms have regulated the spaces and the ways in which female presence was considered respectable. In particular, everything that is or can be related to women’s sexuality must be protected and concealed from the public (Shirazi, 2009). As such, two very different spaces have been defined, with unwritten rules regulating how women can preserve their honour in the public and in the private spheres. In particular, scholars have argued that women’s agency in public and political spaces is dependent on their subordination to Islamic feminine virtues, and on the presence of the *mahram*, i.e., a male relative charged with the role of protecting and supervising them (e.g., Mahmood, 2005; Pratt, 2020; Lussier and Fish, 2016; Najmabadi, 1991). Similarly, in the private sphere, role expectations have been socially built, according to which women should behave first and foremost as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers (Choueiri, 1990; Haddad and Esposito, 1997; Moghadam, 2004). When researching this topic, and

particularly following the events of September 11, 2001, scholarship has thoroughly debated on the question of veiling and its significance in Arab Muslim societies (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 2013; Badran 2009; Keddie, 2007). While in the mainstream and public discourse the veil has been elevated to a symbol of Muslim oppression of women, and the region's cultural backwardness, scholars have instead distanced themselves from this position. Literature has in fact highlighted how veiling has rather different meanings, from representing piety and modesty, to opposition to the West, and to political affiliation, none of which is connected to the repression and the constraint of women's agency (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Charrad, 2011).

Nonetheless, research on how gendered norms contributed to defining women's agency in the Middle East has often been tainted by orientalist views, not being able of going beyond the binary of submission/resistance, and assigning a negative, oppressive attribute to social behavioural norms. Especially after 9/11, one of the main components of the dominant Western discourse on the Islamic world was the duty to rescue Muslim women, and to provide them with real freedom (Abu-Lughod, 2013). The Islamic values at the basis of the gendered norms were represented not by virtue of the religious significance attributed to them, but rather through socio-political lenses, and they were described as social cages constraining women's places in society. By contrast, instances of rebellion towards Islamic culture and conformity with Western values were praised, and women's resistance and opposition became the living proof that gendered norms were in fact restraining women's agency in the Muslim world. This is particularly evident in the literature analysing the gender component during and following the Arab Springs (e.g., Awatef, 2014; Badran, 2016; Ghanim, 2017). Women's bodies were understood as the site of rebellion, and their physical transgressions of the modesty and female respectability

norms were analysed at length (e.g., Hafez, 2014; Haghani, 2015; Sorbera, 2014). However, the overrepresentation of those women and their instances of emancipation from gendered norms, have resulted in the oversimplification of women's positions, and in the reinforcement of the stereotype of what Cooke defined as the 'Muslimwoman' (Cook, 2008). The 'Muslimwoman' stands for the "emergence of a new singular religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical, and even philosophical diversity" (Cooke, 2008: 91). According to this concept, Islam only functions through the oppression of women, and the perseverance of patriarchal hierarchies and unwritten norms. Notwithstanding the presence of women defying cultural and religious practices across the Middle East, it would be erroneous to understand their actions as representative of women's homogeneous rebellious activism and feminism in the region.

With the aim of representing Muslim women's agency beyond the exclusive categorisations of passive submission or active resistance, some scholars have engaged with studying Islamic female movements, understanding the intersection between Islam, gendered norms and women's behaviour. Ground-breaking for the field was Mahmood's study of the piety movement in Egypt (Mahmood, 2005). While the author acknowledges how, in the past, instances of Islamic feminism have been associated with "fundamentalism, the subjugation of women, social conservatism, reactionary atavism, [and] cultural backwardness" (Mahmood, 2005: 5), her study reveals a different reality. Women, aware of the religious significance and the social and political implications, choose to accept and to re-signify the same gendered norms, not by passively submitting to their imperatives, but by creating social spaces for their agency without disrespecting the traditional Islamic values. Hence, rather than living gendered norms as constraining, and overcoming the dichotomy between Islamic values and modernity, some

women “find identity, solace, and strength in them” (Moghadam, 2010). Besides the piety movement, female Islamic activism is particularly present in specific areas, including charity and social work, with peculiarities depending on the context analysed (Charrad, 2011). Particularly significant in showing how women resorted to Islamic values and gendered norms according to their own terms, is the practice of veiling, and how it is a “political statement of women, an active reappropriation on their behalf of Islamic religiosity and way of life rather than its reproduction by established traditions” (Gole, 1997: 4). By reclaiming their own interpretation of Islamic values, women are effectively “changing traditional understanding of what it means to be a Muslim woman” (Cooke, 2008: 94), thus negotiating and re-signifying the applications of gendered norms and their roles in society.

1.1.2 Women in Jihadist Terrorist Organisations

Scholars have traditionally overlooked gender as a variable in researching terrorism, generally portraying women as innocent, victims of terrorist organisations, naturally prone to peace, and in need of international rescue. In particular, when related to jihadi terrorist organisations, gender stereotypes were combined with orientalist views on the Muslim woman: not only female agency has been described on the basis of gender expectations, but also as oppressed and sexualised by the terrorist groups (e.g., Ahram 2015; Hojaty, 2016). However, academia has recently started overcoming the gendered and orientalist perspectives, recognising the roles played by women in terrorist organisations (e.g., Ali, 2006; Bloom, 2005a; Bloom, 2007; Davis, 2007). In particular, scholarship has focused on shining a light on women’s motivations to join terrorist movements, and on analysing the reasons

and the strategic logic behind women's recruitment, and the roles they play within terrorist groups.

While it is recognised that some terrorists coerce and force women into joining their organisations through gender-based sexual violence, this section is solely dedicated to reviewing literature examining the motivations for which women rationally and freely decide to become members of terrorist groups. Scholarship generally mentions the difficulties in outlining which factors push women into joining terrorist organisations. As it has been recognised, there is no single, universal element capable of explaining the different experiences of women's recruitment in terrorist movements (Bloom, 2011; Margolin, 2016). As such, literature has rather analysed women's motivations from different perspectives, often through the binary of the personal/emotional, and public/political. When examining those personal reasons, scholars have often outlined the emotions connected to the spheres of shame, personal revenge, or loneliness (e.g., Schweitzer, 2006). Bloom (2011) sustains that women are motivated by the four R's: Revenge, Redemption, Relationship, and Respect. Women's involvement in terrorist acts has been linked with the death of loved ones or close family members (Bloom, 2005a; Khelghat-Doost, 2021; Margolin, 2016). Family tragedies and the consequent need for vengeance would thus consist in one of the key factors behind women's radicalisation. Other authors define scandal and the consequent emotion of shame as the triggering factor leading to women's involvement in terrorist organisations (Berko, 2007). Hence, women's recruitment would depend on the need of cleansing her and her family's name, and on the pride and honour connected to being a member of a terrorist group (Victor, 2004). In addition, women's mobilisation has been understood as initiated by kinship ties. Family connections, whether through relatives or marriages, have proved to be a factor in the participation of women in terrorist movements, as they

inspire emotions such as loyalty and family duty (Bloom, 2011). Lastly, another factor contributing to women's radicalisation is the wish to gain respect in their communities. Engaging in terrorist activities can be the source of admiration, and at its extremes, even the means to reach the status of heroines and models in their social context (Matusitz, 2019). Notwithstanding the fact that the emotional level is significant in understanding the motivations behind women's engagement in terrorist organisations, it is equally relevant to analyse female mobilisation from the public perspective. In particular, scholarship has focused on analysing the ideological and political motivations (e.g., Margolin, 2016; Matusitz, 2019). Despite the masculine elements of the Islamic resistance, women too are members of the terrorist organisations engaged in national liberation struggles and in the jihad (Khalili, 2007). The reasons behind their participation are ideological, both political and religious. In fact, they can be understood as the desire both to overturn the political status quo and thus obtain social change, as well as to implement Islamic teachings in the political sphere (Holt, 2010). In addition, they are also related to religious beliefs, and the promised rewards for their death as *shaheed* (martyr) (Erez and Laster, 2020). Besides, women's participation in terrorist groups has been analysed in connection to women's position in societies. Researchers have argued that joining terrorist movements has provided women with a path toward emancipation (e.g., Ali, 2006; Bloom and Lokmanoglu, 2020; Matusitz, 2019). The *mujahidaat* (Muslim female fighters) supposedly find in their involvement in terrorist organisations and in terrorist acts a way to escape the gendered social boundaries and expectations, and a place to assume more significant roles in society (Ali, 2006). The two binaries through which women's motivations to become terrorists were analysed – i.e., the personal/emotional and the public/political – are not to be considered as mutually exclusive. Rather, it is through combinations of

emotions, personal experiences, and political and religious ideologies that women's involvement in terrorist groups can really be grasped and understood (Erez and Laster, 2020; Margolin, 2016).

Despite the traditional understanding that women are not allowed to become part of the jihad (Cook, 2005), findings have led to the realisation of the growing phenomenon of jihadi female terrorism, and to the need of analysing it. Therefore, in the past two decades, scholarship has paid more and more attention to women's roles as terrorists and the extent of their agency (e.g., Abdellatif and Ottaway, 2007; Davis, 2007; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2011). When researching female engagement in terrorist activities, scholars have mainly focused on studying women through gendered stereotypes, mostly describing their identities as mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters, and mostly taking into account their active roles when studying the phenomenon of suicide bombings. By virtue of their domestic and social positions in families and in communities, literature has argued that women in terrorist groups are particularly active in the recruitment efforts (e.g., Sageman, 2004). Because of the centrality of women's roles within the family and the society, it is believed that they occupy a privileged position to influence members of the community into joining the jihad, and thus contribute to the growth of terrorist movements (Davis, 2007). Women's roles and presence in family circles, female gatherings, and public spaces such as schools and markets, as well as the cyberspace, allow them to expand the members of terrorist organisations, reaching audiences that would otherwise be inaccessible (Khelghat-Doost, 2021). Moreover, adding to the image of women as wives and mothers, scholars have identified giving birth to the next generation of fighters as one of their primary duties in terrorist groups (Bloom, 2005b; Davis, 2007). Their social positions in the domestic and public spheres are not only advantageous in the promotion and the recruitment of new members, but it also proves

to be strategic in raising money and supporting the terrorist organisations (Lahoud, 2014). In particular, Broadwell (2006) has argued that it is through charity events, the opening of bank accounts under female recruiters' maiden names, and through the circulation of cash money amongst terrorist cells, that women contribute financially to the support of jihadi organisations. Lastly, on account of women's roles in society, scholars have highlighted their contribution to the health and educational fields, supporting the movements both in providing basic welfare services, and at the same time in expanding their institutional roles and weight in societies (Khelghat-Doost, 2021). Recently, most of the literature dedicated to analysing female terrorists' agency has been focused on understanding their combat roles, in particular their involvement in suicide bombings (e.g., Alvanou, 2008; Bloom, 2001; Laster and Erez, 2015; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008). When analysing the phenomenon of female suicide bombers, scholars have mainly researched two aspects: first, the religious and social reasons that would motivate women into becoming *shaheedas*; and second, the strategic advantages related uniquely to female suicide bombers. When examining women's motivations, academia has outlined the social status of *shaheedas*, and the piety, purity, and respect connected to the martyrdom, as well as its impact on their families' statuses in society (e.g., Szalkai, 2012). The alternative explanation points to the religious rewards awaiting in the world hereafter, and the promise to become one of the 72 virgins serving the Prophet (Erez and Laster, 2020). Beyond women's motivations, scholars have recently given great importance to analysing the strategic logic of female suicide bombers, connecting it with gendered social norms. In particular, due to several gendered aspects of the society previously analysed – i.e., the religious and social norms regulating interactions between men and women, the religious style of clothes, and the male-dominant security forces – women have

significantly more chances to go successfully through security checks carrying explosives and/or weapons (Khelgat-Doost, 2021). Women are thus entrusted with important operational tasks by virtue of the presence of gendered norms in Arab Muslim societies, and their impacts on the effectiveness of the operation (Erez and Laster, 2015).

Those studies examining the intersections between gendered norms and female terrorism represent a rather recent trend of the research field. In fact, most of the reviewed literature addressing the phenomenon of female terrorism in Arab Muslim societies has put at the centre of its analyses stereotyped images of Muslim communities and terrorist organisations, rather than prioritising the understanding of the real cultural and social contexts influencing women's experiences. These approaches have led to partial and biased analyses of the phenomenon. The dominant Western discourse on women being oppressed by the backward and violent Muslim communities, and the resulting Western obligations to rescue them (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Pratt, 2012), are indeed reflected in some of the scholars' analyses of female terrorism in jihadist organisations, as well as in international and governmental agencies. Overall, the mainstream studies on female jihadist terrorism misconstrue the motivations behind women's membership in terrorist organisations, either identifying them in coercion or in the quest for more freedom (Ali, 2006; Davis, 2007), while thus minimising and underplaying the presence of women joining terrorist groups not despite, but because of the religious, gendered norms. These misled assumptions result in two dangerous implications. First, it results in a relevant gap in the literature, as the active roles played by women in terrorist organisations are often overlooked and underestimated, with most of the studies focusing exclusively on the phenomenon of female suicide bombings. Only a few scholars have recently embarked on researching how women have engaged in alternative combat positions.

For instance, Khelghat-Doost (2021) has conducted a thorough analysis of both the combat and the non-combat roles played by women in operation-based jihadi groups, taking into consideration contextual aspects and religious norms. Secondly, as the state of the art of the literature on the subject remains incomplete, regional counterterrorism approaches are suffering from misconceptions relating to female terrorism. As long as women's identity and agency within terrorist organisations are not examined and represented as they currently are, counterterrorism measure are destined to have little to no impact on the phenomenon, failing to address it in its unique characteristics and its connections with the social context.

1.2. Conceptual Section: Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Agency

1.2.1 Defining Terrorism and Counterterrorism

Terrorism has been described as an essentially contested concept (Sinai, 2008; Smelser and Mitchell, 2002), whose features and definitional boundaries divide scholars from different fields. The multidimensionality of the phenomenon and the politically charged field of research have led different agencies to develop their own conceptualisation of terrorism, answering to their interests and their audience's expectations (Schmid, 2014). Yet, the lack of consensus on a universal definition of the phenomenon amongst scholars and government agencies is not without consequences. Not only would a shared understanding facilitate the cooperation and the dialogue within the academia and with the law enforcement agencies, but it would also provide common guidelines for the international community to use to better define and implement counterterrorism measures (Bruce, 2013).

Indeed, “countering terrorism is intimately related to understanding the nature of the terrorist phenomenon and how it fits into the wider security environment” (Crelinsten, 2009: 30).

When defining terrorism, mainstream academia has classified it either as an objective or a subjective phenomenon. The former assumes that terrorism is real, characterised by distinctive features, and thus identifiable (e.g., Ganor, 2002). On the other hand, the latter argues that terrorism is a social construct, whose characteristics are dependent on the person researching it (e.g., Bryan, Kelly, and Templer, 2011). Despite the differences in the ontologies concerning the conceptualisation of the term, it is possible to identify some features present in several definitions, for which it is thus relatively possible to assume there is a consensus in the literature. Firstly, many scholars assume that the use of violence or force is a necessary element of terrorism (e.g., Narveson, 1991). As such, the definition contributes to a rather narrow scope of research, not taking into consideration all the non-violent events that however involve harm or threatened harm (Jackson, 2011). Another frequently required element of the phenomenon is its randomness. For instance, Walzer sustained that “terrorism is the deliberate killing of innocent people, at random, in order to spread fear through a whole population and force the hand of its political leaders” (Walzer, 2004: 136). The spreading of fear is often mentioned when defining terrorism, thus making its psychological effects on the larger population part of its essential features (e.g., Goodin, 2006). In addition, the psychological side of the phenomenon is sometimes linked to its political objectives. In these cases, the generation of terror is instrumental to coerce the targeted audience to abide by terrorists’ demands (e.g., Chomsky, 2001). Those demands are repeatedly assumed to be of political nature, thus limiting terrorism drivers to solely political motivations (e.g., Richardson, 2006). Finally, conceptualisations

of terrorism often identify as the targeted audience of the attacks the civilians, also referred to as non-combatants and/or innocents (e.g., Kapitan, 2005). Consequently, counterterrorism approaches differ depending on the different conceptualisations of terrorism. Overall, counterterrorism, often distinguished from anti-terrorism, is generally conceived as the ensemble of measures aimed at reducing the terrorism threat, and thus eliminating terrorist organisations and environments (Martin, 2003). When viewed as a particular form of warfare, counterterrorism measures involve the use of force; if understood as a criminal activity, then the states' security services, including intelligence agencies and policies, are tasked with the deployment of counterterrorism strategies; defined as a state security threat, counterterrorism approaches are usually related to homeland security; lastly, through the lenses of socio-political grievances and conflict, counterterrorism tactics comprise conciliation and dialogue (Jackson *et al*., 2011).

From 2006 onwards, following the dissatisfaction with the traditional scholarship on terrorism and counterterrorism, its biases and practices, researchers have started to approach the topic from a critical point of view. Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) is thus aimed at challenging dominant perspectives and knowledge of terrorism, while simultaneously being reflective of its own standpoints and values (Breen-Smyth *et al*., 2008). Recognising that most of the literature on research has been funded by states, and thus is driven by states' agenda, interests, and biases (Blakeley, 2007; Jarvis, 2009; Stokes, 2009), scholars have begun to diversify their perspective, adopting a human-centred approach, rather than prioritising national security (Jackson, 2016). In CTS, terrorism is understood as a social construct, yet it is not denied that objective features are essentially connected to the term. As such, it is possible to provide a definition of the phenomenon. Terrorism

is conceptualised as “the strategically indiscriminate harming or threat of harming members of a target group in order to influence the psychological states of an audience group in ways that perpetrators anticipate may be beneficial to the advancement of their agenda” (Jackson, 2016: 110). In such a way, the scope of the studies is rather broadened, escaping the boundaries set by the policy-relevant approach used in traditional terrorism studies (Jarvis, 2009). In addition, CTS scholars sustain the need to go beyond the Eurocentric, Western conceptualisation of the term and consequent approaches to counterterrorism. The narrow focus that has so far been applied by terrorism academia has resulted in the partial and incomplete production of knowledge on the subject, lacking any understanding of the cultures and histories in which terrorist organisations are formed (Jackson, 2016). Besides, CTS approaches to counterterrorism are not aimed at problem-solving, but they are rather guided by the concept of emancipation. Emancipation is understood as the need to “open up discursive space and amplify the voices that have been silenced by dominating discourse” (Jackson, 2016: 221). As a result, counterterrorism is understood as context-dependent. In addition, understanding terrorism as a social phenomenon, counterterrorism approaches have taken into consideration that conflicts are often at the roots of terrorist organisations, and that, contrary to traditional counterterrorism strategies, resorting to violence would thus only lead towards a self-fulfilling prophecy and to a vicious cycle of violence (Jackson, 2016).

Thus, having reviewed the main elements of both traditional and critical schools of thoughts related to terrorism and the resulting counterterrorism approaches, based on its context-sensitive and human-centred perspectives, this dissertation will be inscribed within the field of CTS, adopting its understandings of the mentioned phenomena.

1.2.2 Problematising Women's Agency in Terrorist Organisation

Adopting CTS' definitions of terrorism and counterterrorism, and with the aim of going beyond traditional and context-blind understandings of women's agency in terrorist organisations, this study will be based on a problematised conceptualisation of agency.

Agency has been defined as "an individual's ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes" (World Bank, 2012). When looking at how women's agency has been framed and analysed in the field of Terrorism Studies, it appears that either women are portrayed as irrational, emotionally driven, fully immersed in a social context that leaves them with no decision to make, and thus non-agents (e.g., Gronnvoll and McCauliff, 2013); or as full-agents, rising above the misconceptions of passivity and irrationality, and acting despite or even against their social context (e.g., Nacos, 2005). The first conceptualisation offers an understanding of women's agency that is inscribed and furthers gender stereotypes. In fact, as femininity is fundamentally tied to concepts of peacefulness and innocence, female terrorism is understood as a deviancy of women's expected behaviours, and it is explicable solely by categorising it as irrational and driven by emotions (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007). The second framework, instead, elevates women as out-of-context agents, completely free from social and gendered constraints, and able to challenge and act against them.

It is hereby assumed a different understanding of agency, far from the "two opposite poles of self-agency and victimhood" (Moon, 1997: 52). Agency is not construed based on or in spite of the context, but rather within it: "while it is important to look at what people decide and the

contexts in which they decide it, it is equally important to look at the conditions of possibility for seeing them (or failing to see them) as decision-makers in those contexts" (Jackson, 2016: 151). Recognising that each decision is taken in a tangle of social constraints, role expectations, and external pressures, as well as in a matrix of personal and political motivations, this study proposes not to ignore them, but to situate women's lived experiences in them, to better understand the complex phenomenon of female jihadism. It is based on this framework that the analysis of female terrorism will be carried out in Chapter 4, highlighting the operativity of gendered norms in the researched social context and how they influence women's self-understandings and agency in terrorist organisations.

The choice of framing the analysis through a problematised conceptualisation of agency does not only result in context-sensitive, less biased understandings of women, but it also uncovers previously overlooked aspects of women in terrorist organisations, thus providing the basis for more inclusive, more effective counterterrorism strategies. In fact, as "gendered assumptions about women's motivation and recruitment into terrorist organisations lead to equally gendered counterterrorism policies" (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2016: 23), national and international responses have been "frequently misguided and out of touch" (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2016: 23).

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This dissertation is inscribed within a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology, according to which reality is based on the intersubjective production of understandings, for which obtaining and communicating knowledge does not rely on objective observations of events, but rather on their interpretations (Curtis and Curtis, 2017). The qualitative methods design has been chosen as the most suitable for the proposed research due to its emphasis on context and process (Bryman, 2012: 280). In fact, given the centrality of gendered and context-specific norms and their interpretations in the identified research problem, qualitative approaches are deemed the most appropriate to shine a light on their meanings and impacts on the phenomenon of female jihadi terrorism and on national counterterrorism approaches. The research question under study will be first addressed in two separate parts, for which the qualitative analysis will be conducted with different research methods, namely interpretive process tracing and comparative case studies. In the following sections, the choice of methods and analytical procedures will be outlined and reflected upon.

2.1 Interpretive Process Tracing

Interpretive process tracing (IPT) has been described as a research method interested in investigating the relations between events, placing “causal explanations in interpretively generated constitutive explanations” (Norman, 2021: 951). Differently from how positivist researchers would examine and test causal relations, interpretive process tracing has been applied to assess “how ideational processes and meanings can shape how dynamic social processes play out” (Lamont, 2022: 109). IPT has been chosen for investigating the first

component of the research question, i.e., the operativity of gendered norms within female jihadism. The method is indeed instrumental in revealing "how collective self-understandings emerge, the necessary conditions to activate them, and how these inform preferences, strategies, and actions" (Magcamit, 2020: 690). It will thus help to elucidate how context-based gendered norms in Arab Muslim societies inform female terrorism: how they have been shaping women's self-understandings as terrorist agents and the scope of their agency in the past two decades. In fact, one of the strengths of the chosen method is its sequencing aspect, for which it "gives close attention to phenomena as they unfold throughout time" (Ruffa, 2020: 1144). In particular, the hypothesis that will be investigated is the following: changes occurred in the background conditions regulating female terrorism – i.e., the intersubjective gendered norms informing women's identity and agency – have made it possible for radicalising causes to result in a never seen level of women's agency. The hypothesis will not be tested according to the most mechanical and technical version of process tracing (e.g., Collier, 2011), but rather according to a more pluralistic view, which allows for complex non-linear phenomena to be analysed (Vennesson, 2008). In order to assess the validity of the hypothesis, the analysis has been conducted in two steps.

Firstly, it is necessary to investigate the social context and the assess the operativity of gendered norms as background conditions. As such, a thorough examination of the societal gendered values and beliefs and their evolution will be conducted through constitutive analysis. It is important to note that the chosen social context does not correspond to Arab Muslim societies as a whole. In fact, it would consist in a too broad and diversified context for which generalisations would result in oversimplifications and partial, if not erroneous, findings. Rather, the social context that will be examined is the one of the radicalised,

jihadist communities within Arab Muslim countries. By virtue of the transnational elements of jihadi terrorism and its common ideology and values, it is deemed possible to generalise findings from its analysis without flattening its unique characteristics. The purpose of this first step is to outline how gendered norms permeate and inform the realm of female terrorism: the attributes of women's self-identification as terrorists, women's understandings of their own agency, and how the terrorist organisations themselves defined and delimited women's identity and agency. Therefore, the analysis will be based both on women's first-hand accounts of their own lived experiences as terrorist agents, and on terrorist organisations' official documents and propaganda material. The timeframe chosen for this section is between US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, both understood as pivotal moments with significant consequences on female terrorism. The constitutive analysis will be carried out by taking into account data from several Arab Muslim countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria), and by examining information related to Salafi jihadi terrorist groups. This part of the analysis does not rely on primary data generated through participants. Rather, it relies on terrorist women's open-source testimonies and on terrorist organisations' official documents available in the public domain. As the constitutive analysis relies completely on the chosen testimonies, it is of fundamental importance to verify the accountability of the data. As such, the accounts that will be used in this section have been chosen based on the reliability of the sources, measured through the comparison of both academic sources and news stories, using only the data deemed credible and authentic. The decision to resort to data both on the individual and on the organisations' level has been made in order not to reproduce propagandistic messages or isolated individual understandings, but to reconstruct as accurately as possible the

intersubjective meanings present in the social context, taking into consideration the relevance of both perspectives. To that end and to reinforce the structure and rigour of the method, the following questions have been asked when examining the data:

1. Are gendered norms and related concepts (i.e., honour, pride, dignity, respectability, shame, etc.) mentioned by women when describing their expectations and desires related to becoming agents of terror? If so, how?
2. Do gendered norms and related concepts inform women's understandings of their own identity and role expectations? If so, how?
3. Are gendered norms and related concepts mentioned or portrayed by terrorist organisations or prominent terrorist figures when addressing female terrorism? If so, how?

Secondly, the analysis will focus on examining how the changes in the broader social context identified in the first section have re-shaped the expected outcomes of radicalising causes, thus leading toward new models of female jihadism. Recognising that changes in the background conditions as the result of a longer, non-linear social process, the analysis will be carried out by case comparisons with the same timeframe as the first section (2003-2019), examining the personal stories of four famous female jihadists: Sajida al-Rishawi, Ahlam al-Nasr, Nada al-Qahtani, and Umm Anas (al-Hajiah). Those four cases were chosen based on two necessary and sufficient conditions: first, the need to select cases that, by virtue of their popularity and acceptance by the social context, could be elevated to models of female jihadism and therefore to the expression of the changing background conditions; and second, the need to select cases for which, due to their popularity, enough credible and reliable material could be found in the public

domain. In fact, similarly to the first section of the study, the analysis does not rely on data collected from participants, but rather on data collected from academic sources and news stories. The selected information was chosen by excluding the data that could not be verified by multiple sources. The analysis will be conducted by examining both women's direct quotations and first-hand testimonies, and what it is known about their lived experiences as female terrorists. Therefore, the study will be carried out on two levels: the individual one, showing women's self-understanding and desires; and the collective one, showing how those understandings and desires were received and acted upon within the social context and the terrorist organisations. The two-level analysis is instrumetal to reconstruct the different stages of the process, highlighting the convergencies and divergencies between the changed meanings of gendered norms and the consequent adaptation of female jihadism. To that end, the following questions have been asked when examining the data:

1. How do women's testimonies portray their identity and agency? How does it relate to the contextual gendered norms?
2. How are women's self-understandings met by the terrorist organisations? If they are accepted, how are they translated into practices?
3. Based on the previous questions, what are the main characteristics of the models of female terrorism they represent?

The results of this analysis will be articulated in detail in Chapter 3.

2.1.1 Methodological Reflections

IPT has been mainly criticised for not being rigorous enough in explaining causal mechanisms and testing hypotheses (e.g., Collier, 2011), and for oversimplifying complex phenomena and relations (e.g., Lebow, 2014). Although these criticisms are grounded in reasonable limitations of the method, it should be noticed that the same limitations cannot be easily alleviated without renouncing to the advantages of interpretive process tracing. Firstly, the less-technical testing process of hypotheses allows the researcher to analyse complex webs of events and relations that, by virtue of their non-linear, non-chronological characters, could never pass the otherwise complicated verifying tests (Ruffa, 2020). Moreover, avoiding "a dogmatic interpretation of the mechanismic mission" (Gerring, 2010: 1499) does not equal interpretive process tracing to simple story-telling: it is still a valid research method, characterised by a focus, a structure, and the purpose of providing a narrative explanation of a causal relation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In addition, to overcome this criticism and strengthen the rigour of the method, the author has examined the data through a set of pre-determined questions, ensuring the structure and the linearity of the analysis. Secondly, while it is true that IPC does require a great level of simplification of events, it does not claim to provide an exhaustive explanation of a certain phenomenon, but rather it is interested in highlighting "the specific aspect of the system which makes a difference for dispositions of the agents we are interested in" (Norman, 2021: 951). As such, it is not hereby claimed that the analysis will provide a comprehensive explanation for the evolutionary process female terrorism has undergone in recent years, but rather the purpose of the study is to highlight the modalities in which its intersections with

gendered norms have provided for the possibilities and have informed such changes.

2.2 Comparative Case Studies

The second section of the empirical analysis will be conducted through a comparative case studies method. Case study methods provide the opportunity to closely observe phenomena and understand them in their nuances, while at the same time providing the ground for generalisation (Ruffa, 2020). As such, the method will be utilised to address the second part of the research question, related to the extent to which gender perspectives are integrated into counterterrorism efforts in the Middle East. Through the comparative case studies, it will be examined in detail the modalities in which women are portrayed and integrated into national counterterrorism efforts, and the findings will be generalised for the region of interest. The case studies were purposefully chosen through a case-oriented design, which “aims at rich descriptions of a few instances of a certain phenomenon” and “seeks to understand complex units” (della Porta: 2008: 198). As such, the analysis aims to prioritise the account for complexity, while still seeking to generalise its conclusions. Given the analysis’ double purpose of understanding and generalising how gender is integrated into States’ counterterrorism efforts in the Middle East, it was necessary for the chosen case studies to be particularly affected by the phenomenon and for them to represent role models in the counterterrorism field. Thus, Iraq and Jordan were strategically chosen as the most suitable cases in function of two necessary and sufficient conditions: the presence and persistence of the terrorism threat, and in particular the presence of female terrorism; and the countries’ leading roles in the fight against terrorism. In particular, the

analysis will be conducted on the countries' National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security. The strategies were chosen because of their gendered character, and to facilitate the comparison. In fact, they both provide sufficient ground to understand the countries' conceptualisation of womanhood and its connection to terrorism, and they both answer to the same agenda provided by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

The comparison will be carried out by combining the structured focused comparison technique with the feminist policy analysis framework. A structured focused comparison is a technique according to which the analysis is conducted by asking the same set of questions across different cases, focusing solely on certain elements related to the chosen phenomenon (George and Bennet, 2005). Iraq's and Jordan's National Action Plans will be scrutinised by asking a predetermined set of questions focusing on gender aspects and female terrorism. The set of questions is generated based on the feminist policy analysis framework proposed by McPhail (2003). The purpose of the framework relies on "making visible the underlying assumptions and stereotypes of women embedded in policy, and how women's lives and roles are regulated and constrained by policy" (McPhail, 2003: 44). It is thus believed to be particularly advantageous for the proposed analysis, as it allows to investigate the two strategies through gender lenses, looking both at language and symbolic notions, and at its material impact. Combining the two techniques, the two case studies will be first analysed separately according to the following set of questions:

1. To what extent were women involved in the drafting and development processes of the National Action Plan? How inclusive were the processes? Who was excluded, and with what consequences?

2. How are women's identity and agency portrayed by the policy? To what are those conceptualisations embedded in traditional and gendered understandings and role expectations? How do they inform the provisions addressing women and terrorism? How do they inform the policy's silences?
3. To what extent can the policy be described as merely symbolic or as providing for material improvements in the society? To what extent are women integrated in the implementation process of the policy, and with what consequences?

The findings will be then compared and they will constitute the ground for generalising how the phenomenon of female terrorism is perceived and countered in the region of the Middle East.

2.2.1 Methodological Reflections

Case study methods have been criticised due to their little rigour and the tendency towards generalisation (Ruffa, 2020). In order to address these concerns and improve the quality of the analysis, the study has been conducted with carefully chosen method design and technique. In fact, while it is acknowledged that the research to some extent does strive for generalisability, the case-oriented method put emphasis on recognising and understanding the complexity of the units, and only subsequently using the findings as the basis for generalisation. The present analysis does not claim to flatten the differences in which female terrorism is addressed by the different countries of the region, nor does it support the idea of analysing counterterrorism strategies out of their contexts. Rather, it aims at understanding the chosen

counterterrorism efforts in their context, and, based on their similarities and the countries' geopolitical status in the area, it aims at reconstructing the general understandings and approaches to female terrorism. Secondly, in order to conduct this analysis as rigorously as possible, it has been chosen the technique of structured focused comparison. Grounding the questions on the feminist policy analysis framework, and focusing the questions on the specific aspects of womanhood and female terrorism, the technique has allowed for a more rigid and stringent comparison.

2.3 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The research was conducted with utmost care toward ethical considerations. As the study was carried out through the analysis of documents, lived experiences, and testimonies available in the public domain, the informed consent and confidentiality concerns did not arise, and, when present in the utilised resources, the anonymity of participants was maintained. The chosen methods and design have also made irrelevant any safety issues related to the steps taken in the research.

Despite having been chosen as the most suitable for addressing the research problem and answering the research question, the methodology is not without limitations. Due to professional commitments and lack of resources, it has not been possible for the author to conduct the analysis based on data collected from participants. As such, being the study based on data present in the public domain, it suffers from different limitations. Firstly, the collection of sources for the first section of the empirical analysis was severely limited by the scarcity of English coverage of Arab female terrorism, both in academia and in reliable newspapers, and by the difficulties in navigating the Arab web. Similarly,

the scope of the analysis has been limited by the lack of resources covering and researching female jihadism from different organisations than ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Having chosen to prioritise accuracy and reliability, findings are thus generated from collected data related to those terrorist organisations. In addition, the available documents and first-hand testimonies regarding female terrorism are often the product of subjective views on the phenomenon, either of the anti-jihad Arab governments or of the sources connected to jihadi terrorist organisations. Thus, tackling this concern, particular attention has been paid to collecting only objective information and excluding propagandistic accounts. Besides, the second section of the empirical analysis was limited by the little information available regarding the drafting and development process of Iraq's and Jordan's National Action Plans, and by the few reports analysing the successfulness and the impact they had on the respective societies. Consequently, the findings and subsequent generalisation of Arab counterterrorism approaches towards female terrorism suffer from those concerns. Lastly, relating to the author's personal limitations, self-reflexivity exercises were conducted while collecting and analysing data, as well as in the writing process, in order to uncover potential biases undermining the objectivity of the analysis, and not to reproduce personal views in the study.

CHAPTER 3: GENDERED NORMS AND WOMEN IN JIHADI TERRORIST ORGANISATIONS

This chapter will address the issue of female terrorism from a context- and gender-sensitive perspective. The findings of this section are fundamental in addressing the proposed research question, as they both contribute to delineating the current characteristics of the phenomenon and its intersections with gendered norms, and they provide the ground against which counterterrorism strategies will later be checked. In this section of the dissertation, it will be conducted a qualitative analysis of how gendered societal beliefs and practices have been operating within the context of women's engagement in terrorism activities, and how changes in the social context have produced changes in women's agency. The realm of female jihadi terrorism is indeed infused with gendered norms deriving from the Arab Muslim culture, particularly related to the concepts of honour, dignity, pride, humiliation, and shame. Differently from the reviewed literature and positioning the study more closely to the operativity of gendered norms in terrorist groups, voices from women – belonging to different statuses, social backgrounds, and countries – and institutional voices from terrorist organisations will be hereby presented and examined. The aim of the analysis is not to provide additional causal explanations for women's radicalisation and terrorist roles, but rather to reveal how changes in the applications of gendered societal beliefs allowed for the same causal drivers to produce different outcomes in female jihadi terrorism. In particular, the analysis will investigate the validity of the following hypothesis: changes occurred in the background conditions regulating Arab female terrorism – i.e., the intersubjective gendered norms informing women's identity and agency – have made it possible for radicalising causes to result in an never seen level of women's agency.

Firstly, attention will be paid to the context relating to the societal understandings of women's positions, actions, and ultimately their identities within terrorist groups. Subsequently, with the intent of registering how the socially constructed meanings around female terrorism impacted women's agency and roles, it will be introduced in detail the case studies of four famous terrorist women in Arab Muslim societies, including their backgrounds, statuses, and roles they played. Lastly, based on the presented case studies, it will be examined how broader changes in the societal context have brought about and have shaped changing behaviours and different applications of gendered norms in the context of women in jihadist terrorist organisations.

3.1 Gendered Norms in the Social Context: Shifting toward New Meanings and Applications

There is no precise estimate regarding the number of Arab women joining jihadi terrorist organisations, yet the phenomenon of Arab female jihadists, their *hijra* (migration) and *nafir* (departure for jihad), are believed to be significant and worth of attention (e.g., Fatani, 2017). Despite the fact that it is not possible to generalise their radicalisation processes or the motives behind their decisions (Bloom, 2011; Margolin, 2016), one thing that unites most of their accounts is the description of the final destination of their *hijra*, whether towards Al-Qaeda- or ISIS-controlled territories. In fact, testimonies from Arab women often refer to it as a place where Islamic values and laws are truly established and upheld. According to the words of Rima al-Jraish[2] in her missives to her husband, the land of the caliphate is a land "where there is pride and

[2] Rima al-Jraish, supposedly killed in a airstrike in al-Hasaka, Syria, was a Saudi woman who migrated to ISIS territories in Syria and became the head of the Al-Khansaa Electronic Brigade, charged with the task of online female recruitment.

dignity", and her decision to migrate to Syria came from her refusal to conduct "a life of humiliation" (Rima al-Jraish, quoted in Rumman and Hanieh, 2017: 247). Similarly, Iman al-Bugha[3] described the life in ISIS territories as truly adhering to Islamic ethics and morals, where the Islamic spirit consists of the driver and the result of each and every aspect of social life, whether relating to the economic, social, or legal sphere (Rumman and Hanieh, 2017). Likewise, Ahlam al-Nasr,[4] in one of her tweets regarding life in the caliphate, stated: "I saw women wearing veil, everyone treating each other with virtue, and people closing up their shops at prayer times" (al-Nasr, quoted in Creswell and Haykel, 2017:25). As evidenced by these personal accounts, migrating towards Al Qaeda- or ISIS-controlled territories was understood as a way to conduct a life that was fundamentally characterised by the same virtues at the basis of the religious gendered norms: dignity, modesty, and honour. Explicit in al-Jraish's testimony, but implicitly present in the other accounts as well, living outside the territories of the caliphate meant instead compromising Islamic virtues with worldly and corrupting visions and needs, thus leading towards a life of humiliation and struggle.

While these women occupied relatively prominent positions within the jihadist terrorist group, women's role within Salafi terrorist organisations has not been traditionally associated with high-rank statuses (Lahoud, 2014). According to Umayma al-Zawahiri,[5] women's principal role "is to protect the jihadis [through] bringing up their children, [managing] their homes, and [keeping] their secrets" (al-Zahwhiri, quoted in Lahoud, 2010). Similarly, as stated in the 14th article of the ISIS'

[3] Iman al-Bugha, Syrian national, joined ISIS in October 2014. She is known for being a member of ISIS *Shura* Consultative Council, as well as for her sound ideological and religious doctrine.
[4] Ahlam al-Nasr is a Saudi national, known for being the poetess of ISIS. Supposedly the daughter of Iman al-Bugha, she migrated to al-Raqqa in 2014 and has become a member of the terrorist group.
[5] Umayma al-Zawahiri is the wife of the al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Madina Charter, women are called to remain in their homes, which are recognised as their principal place, and thus not to be left if not for emergency situations, and are to uphold religious and modest behaviours and customs, including their choice of clothing (ISIS, 2013). These institutional accounts exhaustively define the identity and the agency of female terrorists: women are located and confined in the domestic sphere; their identities are presented through their modest clothing and Islamic virtues; and their roles are described in function of males' figures, namely children, husbands, or jihadis.

Thus, the social context emanating from these personal and institutional accounts reinstates how, even in the realm of female terrorism, gendered norms regulate the ways in which women define themselves and are defined by others, as pious and filled with honour. Women's *hijra* is not solely defined as a journey towards engagement in terrorist groups, but more significantly as a journey towards deeper and more dignifying practices of Islam. These practices go hand in hand with the roles women are expected to play in terrorist organisations: supportive roles that mainly envision the woman in the domestic sphere, and as pious and modest wife and mother.

However, more recent accounts, which will later be presented and analysed, testify of a shift in the ways the same gendered norms have been recently informing women's roles within jihadi terrorist organisations. Particularly explicative of the mentioned shift are the depictions of women carrying weapons and fighting in the front-lines, which became central in ISIS visual propaganda. In one video released in February 2019, featuring five armed female militants on the front-line, the ISIS narrator describes the female combatant as "the chaste *mujahid* woman journeying to her Lord with the garments of purity and faith" (ISIS, quoted in Diyab, 2019a). Previously defined social constructs about

female terrorism were shattered by this novel image of terrorist women, publicly holding guns and with active fighting roles. The renovated nature of women's roles in ISIS propaganda is both the result of the broader shift in the operativity of gendered norms in female jihadist terrorism, and the means through which such shift is reproduced and strengthened in the social context. The Companion of Jinan, an all-female jihadi group, has stated: "A woman's decision to fight on the battlefield is a private matter. Women have the freedom to fight so long as they do not engage in sinful activities" (Al-Saleh, 2014). Importantly, the change in the social meaning regarding female terrorism does not implicate the construction of new gendered norms, no longer based on the concepts of honour, piety, and modesty. On the contrary, the same gendered norms were re-signified, leading to new applications relating to the intersections of women and terrorism. The *mujahidin* women are still described as chaste, and their fundamental attributes are still found in purity and faith. Women's respectability is no longer strictly connected with the domestic and familiar sphere. Rather, it emanates from the once shameful public presence and their active roles on the front-lines. Thus, women no longer understand themselves and are understood exclusively as wives and mothers, but also as soldiers and fighters. What before would have been perceived at the very least as controversial or abnormal, has now been normalised as a dignified and dignifying option for female terrorism.

3.2 Models of Arab Female Jihadism

Having identified the broader changes in the social context regarding the general understanding of female terrorism, and with the aim of assessing how the shift in the gendered norms' meanings reshaped women's agency, the following section will be focused on

introducing the four examples of Arab female jihadism represented by the lives of Sajida al-Rishawi, Ahlam al-Nasr, Nada al-Qahtani, and Umm Anas (al-Hajiah).

The story of Sajidah al-Rishawi, an Iraqi national, is a story embedded in violent jihadism. Although nothing is known about her status and social background, there is some information about her familiar context. Her brothers were closely linked to Al Qaeda, one of whom was allegedly Al-Zarqawi's left hand; all three of them died fighting against US troops (Slackman and Mekhennet, 2005). Her husband too belonged to Al-Qaeda, and died as a *shaheed* in the same terrorist attack for which al-Rishawi has been arrested. In particular, Al Qaeda planned a series of simultaneous bombings in Amman, Jordan on November 9th, 2005, in which 57 people were killed and hundreds injured (Al Jazeera, 2005). Sajidah and her husband were the operatives of the attack carried out at the Radisson SAS hotel (BBC News, 2005). When interviewed about her role in the terrorist attacks in Amman, she confessed: "He rented a car, and we went to the hotel. This was November 9. We rented an apartment. He had two explosive belts. He put one on me, and he wore the other. He taught me how to use it, what to pull, and what to do in order to operate it. My husband carried out the operation, but I tried to operate it, but it did not explode. I went out. People started running out, and I ran together with them" (Al-Rishawi, quoted in Wall Street Journal, 2015). On November 13th, 2005, following the failed suicide bombing attempt, Sajida al-Rishawi was arrested in the city of al-Salt, Jordan (Al-Najjar, 2005). She was found hiding in the house of an al-Qaeda terrorist member related to her husband (Rumman and Hanieh, 2017). Following her arrest, she was detained by Jordanian authorities until her execution, carried out on February 4th, 2015 (BBC News, 2015).

Ahlam al-Nasr, also known as the poetess of ISIS, was originally born in Saudi Arabia, and migrated to Raqqa, Syria, in October 2014 at only 15 years old, married the ISIS member Abu Osama al-Gharib, and became part of the terrorist organisation herself (Rumman and Hanieh, 2017). Although she is believed to be Iman al-Bagha's daughter, there is no certain evidence of that. Before and after her *hijra*, al-Nasr published a collection of poems and articles, that later became central in ISIS' propaganda strategies. In one of her earlier poems, she writes:

> "Longing for the Caliphate
>
> O God these are my heart's sighs
> They give me sleepless nights
> When, O God, will you do me that honour?
> When, O God, will you grant me forgiveness?
> My happiness is a pen and a sword
> So that the years of my life resuscitate through struggle
> This will remain my dearest wish
> Even if I was given the greatest honours and success
> And this will remain my obsession as long as I live:
> When will my hand clasp a weapon?" (al-Nasr, 2014: 43).

The poem witnesses one of al-Nasr's many declarations of love towards violent jihad, and her wishes to play an active role in the struggle. Her desires were granted when she was allowed to travel to Syria. Some accounts state that she migrated first with her father, acting as her *mahram*, and was later joined by the rest of her family (Pierret and Cheick, 2015); others instead sustain that she moved to Syria alongside her whole family (Rumman and Hanieh, 2017). Once in the land of the caliphate, al-Nasr was assigned to supportive, domestic roles, including cooking and cleaning for male jihadis. About her role, she mentions: "I was allowed to cook for the *mujahidin*, I was almost flying out of joy. I

was literally obsessed with making sure that everything was clean and good. I started repeating 'this food will be eaten by the *mujahidin*; this silverware will be used by the *mujahidin*. I am now among the *mujahidin*… Is this real, or is it a dream?" (al-Nasr, quoted in Pierret and Cheikh, 2015: 261). Yet, her wishes were directed towards a more central, active role within the terrorist group: "I ask God he grants me the chance to blow up the head of an infidel any time soon! And that I slaughter an apostate soldier" (al-Nasr, 2014b).

Nada al-Qahtani, Saudi national, described herself as "daughter of a great man, the wife of a meritorious man, a graduate of the University of Prophet Yusuf (peace be upon him), and sister of a *mujahid dawlawi*" (al-Qahtani, quoted in Rumman and Hanieh, 2017: 234). Both her husband, Abu Muhammad al-Azdi, and her brother, Abdul Hadi al-Qahtani, are known for having expressed their support towards ISIS and being involved in the group's terrorist activities (Al-Saleh, 2015). Al-Qahtani left her husband and children behind, and migrated unaccompanied towards Raqqa, Syria in November 2013, to join her brother there. In fact, as she was later reunited with her husband and her father in Syria, she writes: "I have been reunited with my brother, then my husband, then father. As for you [her children], you are a piece of my heart, we shall meet in Paradise" (Al-Saleh, 2015). Once arrived in the land of the caliphate, she tweeted: "I ask Allah to bless me and my brother Julaybib with a martyrdom operation to strike your *rafidah* 'rejecter Shiites', then your *tawaghit* 'tyrant rulers', then you 'al-Arabiya' who are deceitfully misrepresenting Muslims through your media" (Al-Qahtani, quoted in Al-Saleh, 2015). She used her online presence not only to declare her wishes and her support towards ISIS, but also to directly address women and encourage them: "urge your husbands and sons O women. I swear by Allah that every meter of [the land of] al-Sham needs a *mujahid*" (Al-Qathani, quoted in Diyab, 2019b: 11). Besides her

dedication to recruitment activities, reports claim that al-Qahtani assumed a prominent role within ISIS, as the lead of the all-female al-Khansaa fighting unit,[6] first in al-Raqqa, and later on in Hasakeh (Al-Saleh, 2016). The claims relating to her position within the terrorist group are further supported by the wide support she received in female Islamist circles. The most influential example was Iman al-Bugha's endorsement, who stated: "Oh dear sister, do not worry about what your people say, what Allah decided will happen whether they approve or not" (Al-Bugha, quoted in Diyab, 2019b: 11).

The story of Umm Anas, also known as al-Hajiah, is a story of violence and leadership. Little information is available about her family and her social background, but it is known that she is an Iraqi national, she was born in 1966, and she is married to an ISIS official whose identity remains undisclosed (Diyab, 2019c). Importantly, the label with which she is known, al-Hajiah, referring back to the practice of the pilgrimage *Hajj*, denotes the respect and authority that characterise her *persona* in the community. She is the chief officer of ISIS al-Khansaa Field Unit in Mosul, Iraq, and she is well-known for her brutality and sadism (Diyab, 2019c). It is reported that, beyond strictly policing the streets of Mosul against any instances of immorality or shameful activities, she also promotes torture against female prisoners, namely with 'the biter' and 'the clipper' (Diyab, 2019c). The biter is a sharp tool with teeth that is pressed against prisoners' breasts as a torture instrument (Kafanov, 2016).

[6] The Al-Khansaa Brigade is an all-female enforcement unit, established by ISIS in 2014 and operating in different cities of the caliphate, including in Raqqa and Mosul. The unit, similarly to moral and religious police in other countries of the region, is charged with the task of ensuring, through violence, that women abide by religious law and norms, including their choice of clothing and attire.

3.3 Gender Norms and Female Jihadism: Tracing Changes in Women's Agency

These four famous women in jihadi terrorist organisations are introduced to exemplify the lived experiences of female jihadism, how it reproduces, it is infused and regulated by gendered norms. The popularity of these four women is taken as the basis for elevating their personal experiences as possible models for the future female militants. The resonance they had in their social community, inspiring fellow radicalised women and representing worldwide the new image of female terrorists, has set them as the visible representation of how the new applications of gendered norms have been operating in terrorist groups. Thus, how they described their renovated agency, roles, and positions within the terrorist organisations will be analysed, highlighting the ties with the same gendered social beliefs and practices that were at the basis of previous understandings of women and terrorism. The purpose of the section is to reconstruct the process that gendered norms and female jihadism underwent throughout the past two decades. It is hereby argued that their breach of previously defined applications of gendered norms was informed by the change occurred in their social context, and will be informing future female *mujahidin* in their roles.

The model exemplified by Sajidah al-Rishawi represents the beginning of the adaptation process of female terrorism to the re-signified gendered norms, characterised by both new and old modalities of understanding and regulating women's agency in terrorist groups. The operative role assumed by al-Rishawi donates her a renewed identity and space, broadening the scope of her agency. As a suicide bomber, she enters into the public space, and her agency is no longer confined to the domestic sphere by virtue of her identity as a wife, and in function of her supportive roles to al-Qaeda. Rather than being a secondary

character of the terrorist attacks carried out in Amman, she became one of the protagonists, and an agent of terror, with autonomy and a mission. Yet, the way she described the events that occurred on November 9th, 2005, reveals the extent to which her understanding of the role she played in the bombings is still tied to previous conceptualisations of female terrorism. In fact, in her confession relating to the event leading to the attack, she is never the only subject performing the action: "*He* had […]. *He* put […]. *He* taught […]. *My husband* carried out […]" (emphasis added, al-Rishawi, quoted in Wall Street Journal, 2015). At the beginning of every action there is her husband, and it is him who guides her in her activities. However, when she becomes the subject of her own narration, after the death of her husband and with no male figure to follow, the verbs used to indicate her actions denote a sense of underachievement and of being out of place. Indeed, she affirmed: "I *tried to* […]. I *went out*. […] I *ran*" (emphasis added, al-Rishawi, quoted in Wall Street Journal, 2015). The model of female jihadism she represents is defined by a woman that becomes an agent and a protagonist of terrorist activities, yet a woman that is still tightly tied to the fate of her husband, and stands insecurely in the public space without a male figure to guide her.

The model of female jihadism found in the story of Ahlam al-Nasr demonstrates the radical changes occurred in women's understandings concerning their agency, and the slow-adapting nature of terrorist organisations. In her poems, the Saudi woman expresses her desire for *hijra* and for the possibility to participate first-hand in the violent *jihad*, which she defines as an honour and a blessing. Even after joining ISIS in Syria, her wishes remain unchanged. Al-Nasr's violent aspiration already proves a fundamental change in how women introjected the gendered norms. Similarly as before, joining terrorist groups is understood and encouraged as an honourable decision. Yet, it is no

longer a decision limited to domestic places and supportive roles, but broadened to the public sphere and to violent operational positions. Moreover, the fact that al-Nasr stated her desires publicly through her poems, and that ISIS decided to use them as part of their propaganda tool – it represents an additional shift in women's agency and a driver for future changes. In fact, through her writings, al-Nasr plays an innovative role as a woman expressing her aspirations toward carrying out violent terrorist activities in the public sphere. On top of that, it is not only accepted by the social context, but it is even welcomed and furthered by the terrorist group, as it is made the heart of their radicalising efforts toward other women. However, it is solely through her pen that the Saudi teenager could escape previous meanings of gendered norms. In fact, her whole agency before and after joining ISIS revolves around male figures: she could only reach the deeply longed land of the caliphate by virtue of the presence of a familial male figure, and her roles in the organisations are limited to cooking and cleaning for male terrorists. The lived experiences of Ahlam al-Nasr represent an intermediate stage of the adapting process of the society to the new meanings of gendered norms, whereby women's understandings of their identity and agency are not yet met with wholehearted acceptance by the terrorist groups.

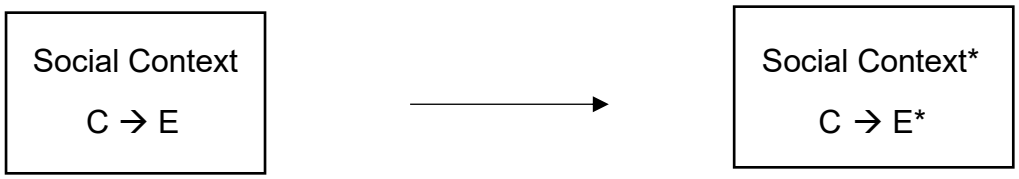
In the same period, but in a different way, the life of Nada al-Qahtani shows once again the complicated and on-going adaptation process of both women and terrorist organisations to the changing social meanings of gendered norms. In many aspects, the model of female jihadism represented by Nada al-Qahtani is absolutely revolutionary compared to previous understandings. Firstly, her *hijra* without a *mahram*, and her public acknowledgment of that, represent a level of agency and independence never before linked to female terrorism. On the contrary, such a decision would have brought shame and humiliation on the woman and her family and in fact, even if her *hijra* was accepted,

many were at the very least sceptical about that line of conduct and criticised her for her actions (Al-Quds al-Arabi, 2013). Yet, al-Qahtani received unconditional support for her decision from fellow terrorist women, amongst which Iman al-Bagha (Diyab, 2019b). Again, women's understandings of their agency and the places they are allowed to occupy were not aligned with their communities' ones. Secondly, the fact that the Saudi woman left her children behind, reveals an important element of her identity. Whilst before women joined terrorist organisations and then became mothers of future generations of *mujahidin*, al-Qahtani renounced her previous identity as a mother, to take upon herself a new identity as a terrorist. Thirdly, her desires to play operational roles beyond the domestic sphere are satisfied by ISIS, as she becomes the head of the all-female Al-Khansaa Brigade. Despite these three elements of her renovated agency and identity, there are still reminiscences of previous meanings of gendered norms. Even though she conducted her migration towards the land of the caliphate without a male figure, she was aware and she relied on the fact that, once arrived at her destination, she would have a male relative to protect her, i.e., her brother Abdul Hadi al-Qahtani. Moreover, even though she stripped herself of her maternal identity to become a member of ISIS, in the introduction she gave of herself, she still identifies as a daughter, a wife, and a sister, thus connecting her identity to her male relatives' ones. Finally, even though she played an active and prominent role within the terrorist organisations, in her radicalisation attempts, she encouraged other women not to take it upon themselves to migrate and become members of terrorist groups, but she rather urged their sons and husbands to do so. Thus, the testimony of Nada al-Qahtani demonstrates the tangled, overlapping old and new meanings of gendered norms, and the complicated ways in which they came to regulate new instances of female jihadism.

The adaptation process culminates with the model exemplified by Umm Anas, whereby new meanings of gendered norms are fully accepted and practiced, both by women themselves and terrorist organisations. The fact that little is known about her family and her husband denotes that there is no longer the need to define the woman in connection to her male relatives, but that she has an independent identity on her own. The label used to refer to her, al-Hajiah, in combination with her role within ISIS and the brutalities she introduced and practices within the Al-Khansaa unit in Mosul, denotes that the gendered norms related to purity, modesty, and female respectability have definitely assumed a different meaning. In fact, previous understandings of women as honourable and respectable, tied to the female presence in the domestic sphere and the limited and concealed public appearances, could not coexist with a woman encouraging and practicing torture as the chief officer of the ISIS all-female brigade. By escaping the previous meanings of gendered norms in female jihadism, Umm Anas represents a model of female terrorism that opens possibilities for women to enact their new identity and agency, hereby defined as autonomous and no longer secondary. Importantly, it is not possible to separate the Iraqi woman's agency from the gendered values of morality and modesty: the purpose of her brutality was to correct women's behaviour and attire in accordance with those gendered moral standards. Defining her identity as masculine (e.g., Diyab, 2019c) is thus inappropriate and it reinforces previous understanding of female identity and agency that are no longer representative of women in jihadi terrorism.

3.4 Conclusions

From the context-sensitive and women-centred analysis, it is possible to understand the evolutionary process that female jihadism has undergone, revealing women's renovated identity and agency. It is important to notice that the examined social development did not occur straightforwardly, nor it is possible to delineate the stages female jihadism went through linearly. The purpose of the analysis is not to outline systematically the ways in which female terrorism developed, but rather to reveal how it organically changed around the shifting social context, by putting lived experiences of female jihadi terrorists at the heart of the study. It has been argued that women are no longer existentially defined through the male figures, nor their agency is limited to domestic positions. Rather, while still abiding by norms of honour, piety, modesty, and respectability, terrorist women have entered the public sphere, as well as they have occupied prominent positions within terrorist organisations.



Therefore, by virtue of shift regarding the applications of gendered norms in the terrorist groups (Social Context → Social Context*), the same causal drivers (C) that once led to expected outcomes of women jihadism (E), for which their identities were understood as mothers, wives, and daughters, and to their roles as secondary and supportive, have culminated in new expectations (E*). Women are identified as their own agents, and endowed with a broader agency, for which combatant roles do not solely consist in suicide bombings.

The significance of these findings goes beyond the academic purpose of providing context-based, gender-sensitive research within the field of Terrorism Studies, no longer produced through Western-

biased understandings of Arab Muslim societies and women. In fact, its relevancy is also found in its practical applications, revealing previously ignored aspects of female jihadism, essential for efficient counterterrorism efforts in the region. As long as counterterrorism strategies' expectations around women portray them as essentially tied to terrorist male figures, and only in domestic and supportive roles, the response to their true identities and agency will not be effective (Patel and Westermann, 2018). In order to assess how responses to female terrorism in the region have represented women and their agency, counterterrorism strategies from Iraq and Jordan will be analysed in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: COUNTERING FEMALE TERRORISM IN IRAQ AND JORDAN

Moving closer to the centre of the analysis, this chapter will address the second section of the proposed research question, analysing regional counterterrorism strategies and their portrayals and understandings of womanhood, with a special focus on the field of terrorism. In particular, it will be conducted a comparative analysis of Iraq's and Jordan's National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security (NAPs-WPS), implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325).[7] The aim of this study is to examine the NAPs through gendered lenses and with a focus on the issue of countering terrorism, thus revealing the modalities in which women's identity and agency are understood, embedded, and reproduced in the strategies. The underlying intent of this section is to uncover the extent to which women are included in counterterrorism efforts, and highlight the silences and exclusions that hinder an effective response to female terrorism. Based on this analysis, in the next chapter, it will be possible to check its findings against women's current experiences in terrorist organisations, thus evaluating the real extent to which counterterrorism measures have taken into account today's reality of gendered norms operativity in the field of terrorism. Iraq and Jordan have been chosen as the case studies for this section due to their direct and indirect exposure to jihadi terrorism and the pivotal roles they play in countering it. Acknowledging the uniqueness of each specific context and the simplification of the matter, their NAPs will be taken as representatives for the modalities in which female terrorism is understood and dealt with

[7] UNSCR 1325 was adopted in 2000 to recognise and address from an institutional point of view the need for women's increased participation in the prevention and resolution of conflict, peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts, as well as in humanitarian actions. The resolution acknowledged both women's vulnerable positions in the context of armed conflicts, as well as the benefits of their agency.

in the region. The case studies will be first examined separately, and subsequently, the findings will be compared and conclusions will be drawn. The structured focused comparison will pay attention to different aspects of the policies: the context in which the strategies were planned and adopted, the processes and the actors involved in the drafting of the texts, the language and the provisions used to address women and terrorism, and finally the implementation process and the impacts they had on their audience.

4.1 Iraq National Action Plan 2014-2018 (INAP)

On the 6th of February, 2014, the Federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government jointly adopted the National Action Plan, for the period 2014-2018. It was the first time in the Middle East that UNSCR 1325 was addressed by a government, and a plan for its implementation was drafted and adopted. The strategy was launched in a context of fundamental fragility, where the Iraqi population and especially women were facing the consequences of previous conflicts, international economic sanctions, and the 2003 US-led invasion (INAP, 2014: 4). In particular, according to the Iraq Woman Integrated Social and Health Survey (I-WISH) of March 2012, low level of education, increasing level of poverty, high rates of unemployment, and rising sectarian violence – all contributed to the dependence of women on their male relatives, and to the persistence of gender-based inequities and traditional role expectations (I-WISH, 2012). Female political participation and representation, both in the legislative and in the executive branch, have also been declining since the election of the first Iraqi House of Representatives in 2005, despite the important roles women played in building and strengthening democracy in Iraq (INAP,

2014). Women were also subjected to high levels of violence, including but not limited to domestic violence, genital mutilation, honour killings, child and temporary marriage, gendered armed violence as well as forced prostitution and trafficking, and the violence, assault, and forced displacement resulted from the post-2003 terrorist attacks (CEDAW Shadow Report, 2014). Related to terrorism, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Shadow Report, released on the occasion of the 57th session of the CEDAW committee in February 2014, notes the emergent phenomenon of female suicide bombers, as "armed groups recruit women to carry out terrorist acts, or to exploit women for logistics and financing" (CEDAW, 2014: 9).

4.1.1 Development Process

Iraq's National Action Plan was drafted and developed through the cooperation between Government Ministries, both from Baghdad and from Kurdistan, and the Iraqi NAP1325 Initiative, which included women's rights organisations and networks across the country (INAP, 2014: 2). The Iraqi NAP1325 Initiative included 31 organisations, amongst which the Baghdad Women Association, the Women Empowerment Organisation, and the Iraqi Women's League (Vilardo and Bittar, 2018). The development process began in 2012 and it mainly consisted of meetings and workshops held within and outside the country, including participants from across the civil society – in particular with the engagement of women's organisations and networks, service providers, and local communities – and it was supported by external actors, namely UN Women in Iraq, the Norwegian Embassy in Amman and the European Feminist Initiative (Aref *et al*., 2018). In 2013, a Cross-Sector Task Force (CSTF) for the development and the implementation

of the National Action Plan was established, encompassing representatives from the Government, the Parliaments, and the civil society (Aref *et al*., 2018). Following the work of the CSTF sub-committees, namely legal, drafting, and financial, the final draft of the INAP was finalised in November 2013 and launched in February 2014 (Vilardo and Bittar, 2018). The strategy revolves around six main pillars: participation, protection and prevention, promotion, social and economic empowerment, legislation and law enforcement, and resource mobilisation, monitoring, and evaluation (INAP, 2014).

Despite the commendable participatory process through which the strategy was developed and drafted, it has been noticed that it was not sufficiently inclusive and horizontally engaging (Guy, 2015; Kaya, 2016). Particularly relevant is the exclusion of the Iraqi Women Network (IWN), which comprises of more than 80 local women organisations. IWN was working on Iraq's commitments to UNSCR 1325 in cooperation with other Iraqi women's networks and coalitions, at the same time in which the Iraqi NAP1325 Initiative was working on the drafting of the National Action Plan (CEDAW, 2014). Given the focus of the CEDAW Shadow Report on armed conflicts' impacts on women, the inclusion of IWN would have benefitted enormously the work of the Iraqi NAP1325 Initiative, and in general the developing process of the INAP, providing more nuanced, context-sensitive analyses and perspectives. Despite the low inclusivity level, the international and few local women's organisations that were not excluded from the drafting process and from the CSTF, were involved in major activities and actively contributed to the different stages of the INAP development process. In particular, they participated in the definition of the common work methodology, in identifying the National Action Plan's goal, purpose, and objectives, as well as in developing the strategic objectives, actions, and results for the

strategy's six pillars, and in the working meetings of the CSTF sub-committees (Aref *et al*., 2018).

4.1.2 Language and Provisions

The strategy's language and text provide for two opposing portrayals of women's identity and agency. The first one, based on the overarching goals of ensuring female representation, participation, and empowerment, envisions women as full citizens, equipped with rights and agency, and upholds their participation as fundamentally needed in every aspect of Iraqi public life. In fact, INAP reaffirms women's "role as actors and not merely as victims of […] conflicts" (INAP, 2014: 4), their right to "participate in the public political affairs" (INAP, 2014: 7), and the possibility for them to work in the security services (INAP, 2014: 8). The second one, instead, based more closely on women's actual identity and roles in Iraqi society and institutions, depicts an image strictly related to traditional gendered understandings and expectations. Indeed, the plan describes women as victims of violence, in need of protection, and by virtue of their roles as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. Women are characterised as "very vulnerable" and charged with the responsibility of "caring for their household" (INAP, 2014: 6), as living "in constant fear of violence and abuse of their dignity" and as paying the price for "taboos and social perceptions of women as objects" (INAP, 2014: 11). It is worth noting that the strategy never once refers to women by their professional title roles. Particularly in the legal section and in the analysis of armed conflicts' impacts on women, it becomes evident how women's identity is essentially tied to that of their husbands. For instance, in INAP's subsection 4.2, women are always identified by virtue of their role as wives when outlining the limitations of their rights and the

entity of their punishments. In INAP's subsection 3, women are not presented as active agents, but rather as suffering the economic and social consequences of conflicts, as the victims of gender-based and sexual violence and the consequent stigma and shame, and as depending on their male relatives for protection and support. Thus, while to some extent, INAP and its goals challenge the traditional dichotomisation between male public figures and female domestic figures, it mostly reproduces and reinforces stereotypical and gendered images of women. It is important to highlight that the two opposing portrayals do not coexist. In fact, the strategy reproduces a static understanding of female agency, conveying an image of women as non-agents in the public sphere. It is through its provisions, by enhancing and deepening their participation in the political life and by legitimising their public roles, that the policy seeks to develop women's full agency, which is yet not present in Iraqi society.

The portrayal of women as passive agents, victims, and essentially connected to their male relatives, is at the basis of how terrorism is dealt with by the policy. The only way the strategy addresses the issue is by examining Clause 2 of Article 4 of the 2005 Anti-Terrorism Law no. 13. Differently from the Penal Law's approach, the Anti-Terrorism Law equates the criminalisation and punishment of the accused person to those closely connected or related to him. INAP, assuming the gender of the accused terrorist as male, suggests that the mentioned provision is particularly punitive towards women – presented through their roles as wife, mother, sister, and grandmother – and proposes to amend the Anti-Terrorism Law by excluding from the criminalisation the people connected to the accused (INAP 2014, 9-13). The fact that the National Action Plan only addresses terrorism in such a way reveals two underlying elements, relating to the assumed role of women in terrorism, and the gendered space of terrorism itself. Women

are presented as either the victims of terrorist activities, or as secondary characters, responsible for concealing actions, harbouring and covering kin terrorist members (INAP 2014, 7-9). As such, the space of terrorism results to be envisioned as male at its core, encompassing women only by virtue of their familial ties and solely in supportive domestic roles. Yet, it was already recognised that women had already emerged as operational and active members in terrorist organisations, both as suicide bombers and as essential assets for logistics and financing (CEDAW, 2014: 9). Despite women's evident active agency within terrorist organisation, the strategy's deafening silence on the issue shows how female terrorism was not yet believed to be a significant issue, and how women's participation and gender-sensitive perspectives were not considered pivotal in countering terrorist activities, thus falling outside the scope of the UNSCR 1325's agenda.

4.1.3 Implementation and Impacts

The implementation process and the coordination of budgets and activities for reaching the strategic and overarching objectives of INAP were entrusted to the Task Force NAP1325 (INAP 2014: 17), and executed through the cooperation of Ministerial Follow-Up Teams (Aref *et al*., 2018). It has been reported that the overall success of the strategy was hindered by both contextual and administrative challenges, notably the exacerbated offensiveness of ISIS and the economic crisis that followed, and the lack of reviews and assessment of progress (Aref *et al*., 2018). Generally, the policy can be classified as being somewhat between merely symbolic and effectively material, as some of its provisions actually provided for the achievement of objectives and results, and others were either too abstract or too ambitious to achieve

in the Iraqi social context.[8] It is important to notice that most of the non-achieved results are connected with the societal refusal of emancipated, non-traditional notions of womanhood and its material consequences – e.g., increasing the number of women in reconciliation committees and increasing the number of women in leadership positions (Aref *et al*., 2018). In fact, the little participation of local women's organisations contributed to the detachment of the strategy from its audience, and thus to its low level of acceptance by Iraqi society: "the essential problem is that it was conceived outside Iraq by feminists outside Iraq" (ex-staff member of international organisation based in Iraq, quoted in Chilmeran, 2022: 759)

Notwithstanding the aggravated entity of the security threat ISIS imposed in Iraq after the conquest of Mosul and surrounding territories in 2014, considering it solely as a challenge for the implementation of INAP would result in ignoring and overlooking the structural deficiencies of the strategy itself. The exclusion of terrorism from the areas of competencies of the strategy has led to the inefficiency of Iraq's response towards all the gendered elements of the security issue. In fact, while the policy discusses women's vulnerabilities in armed conflicts, it fails to address concretely women's insecurities and provides guidance for their protection (Zeynep, 2016). To compensate for INAP's shortcomings in dealing with the worsened emergency, on May 26th, 2015, the Iraqi Council of Ministers launched a one-year Emergency Plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325. The new efforts mostly focused on the protection pillar, particularly related to the needs of displaced women and gender-based and sexual violence survivors (Aref *et al*., 2018). Yet, it left unattended issues related to the prevention of

[8] To learn more about the different levels of achievement for each strategic pillar, objective and activity of INAP, consult 'Annex 3: Level of Achievement of Results' in Aref *et al*, 2018.

radicalisation attempts and the countering of terrorist activities, once again underestimating the value of women's participation in the development of national strategies and their active contributions to combat terrorism and extremism (Chowdhury, 2016).

4.2 Jordan National Action Plan 2018-2021 (JONAP)

On the 3rd of December, 2017, the Jordan Cabinet launched the Jordanian National Action Plan (JONAP) for the period 2018-2021, for the implementation of UNSCR 1325. JONAP concurrently addresses the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242 (UNSCR 2242).[9] While Jordan has not been the theatre of armed conflicts in recent years, due to its geographical location, it suffered the impacts of regional security challenges and instabilities, notably neighbouring security crises and the consequent significant refugee influx. In particular, following the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the Hashemite Kingdom has witnessed an increased flow of refugees, the majority of which represented by women and children (JONAP, 2017: 13). As of June 2017, it is reported that 660,315 registered Syrian refugees were living in Jordanian territories, amongst whom women were particularly vulnerable, due to the persistence of child and forced marriage, sexual violence, and the lack of legal work protection (CARE International, 2017). In addition, the growing security concerns linked to the presence of the Salafi Jihadists were recorded in the Kingdom (Al Sharif, 2016), raised concerns relating to women at risk of radicalisation and the need to integrate gender-sensitive perspectives into Jordanian counterterrorism efforts (JONAP, 2017). Besides those security concerns, the Hashemite Kingdom has

[9] UNSCR 2242 was adopted in 2015 to address the importance and the need to integrate women's perspectives in preventing and countering violent extremism, promoting the partnership with both women and civil society.

been recently developing progressive changes towards women's empowerment, including measures aimed at achieving gender equality, and at reducing the gender gaps in the health and education sectors (CEDAW, 2016).

4.2.1 Development Process

The efforts for the development of a National Action Plan for advancing UNSCR 1325 in Jordan began in 2010, with the establishment of a National Coalition by the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW). Following the regional security developments, notably the beginning of the Arab Springs, the National Coalition was enlarged to encompass members across governmental ministries, civil society organisations and the military sector (JONAP, 2017: 14). In particular, 21 women's organisations were members of the National Coalition (UN Action MPTF, 2017). The drafting process was also carried out with the inputs of the High-Level Steering Committee, established by the Jordanian government, and by external actors, such as UN Women in Jordan, as well as the Governments of Finland and Japan (JONAP, 2017: 14). In order to guide the development process and the identification of Jordan's security priorities concerning UNSCR 1325, several national and local consultations were launched and conducted across the country by JNCW in 2016. It is important to note that the consultations were held in eight out of the twelve Jordanian governorates, and that one consultative session involved the refugee community of al-Mafraq (JONAP, 2017: 19). Following the consultative meetings, the strategic goals and the logical framework of the strategy were developed, and through the cooperation of all the different entities, the National Action Plan was finalised and presented in December 2017.

The strategy revolves around four pillars: participation, prevention of extremism and protection against gender-based violence, relief and recovery in response to the refugee crisis, capacity-building awareness-raising, and participation of civil society and youth (JONAP, 2017).

Overall, the participatory process adopted for the development of JONAP was inclusive and satisfactory on different levels. The flexibility and adaptation of the National Coalition to external factors ensured that the drafted text remained relevant and addressed the security issues that were then of particular concern. The local and national consultations, held across the country, provided for a bottom-up approach to the identification of the strategy's priorities and strategic goals, making sure that the plan was truly embedded in Jordanian society and reflected Jordanian women's suggestions relating to peace and security. Similarly, the civil society organisations' involvement in the development of the logical framework improved the achievability of JONAP's goals. In fact, through the cooperation of both experts and locals, it provided a realistic plan and monitoring and evaluation systems to reach predetermined outcomes and to track JONAP's implementation progress. In addition, the fact that targeted groups, such as the refugee community, were included in the consultative sessions guaranteed that the finalised text could take into account all different perspectives and provide for their specific protection needs.

4.2.2 Language and Provisions

JONAP's language and text are based on and reproduce an image of womanhood which is captured both in her strategic potentialities in the field of peace and security, and in her vulnerabilities in armed conflicts and their consequences. It is important to notice that

the strategy does not portray these two aspects as mutually exclusive, but rather it recognises the different situations for which certain groups of women might require certain protection needs, and others might be equipped and qualified to satisfy them. For instance, when addressing the need for gender-sensitive humanitarian services in the context of refugee camps, the policy recognises both “qualified women” able to “provide services”, and women and girls “vulnerable to violence and in need of protection” (JONAP, 2017: 22). Therefore, women’s agency is not idealised and stripped out of its context, nor it is categorised as either active or passive, but it is rather understood dynamically and in its plurality of forms. Women’s identity is portrayed as independent and by virtue of their roles in society. In particular, JONAP often refers to women by their professional titles (e.g., military women, community leaders, teachers and professors). The Jordan plan never mentions the words “husband” or “wife”, nor “daughter” or “sister”. As such, women are not defined through their male relatives, nor are they confined to the domestic sphere. Instead, their identity is understood in all of its plurality. For example, the strategy does not deny the maternal role of women, but it does not describe it as contributing exclusively to the definition of female identity and to its confinement to the domestic sphere. Rather, it is presented as one of the many aspects of women’s identity. In fact, when JONAP refers to women as mothers, it refers also to their persona as influencers and educators, thus reflecting the public and social implications of their positions within their families (JONAP, 2017: 22).

The strategy’s portrayal of womanhood is also reflected in how it addresses the issues of radicalisation and violent extremism, as women are described as “both champions and potential advocates in combating threats of violent extremism, as well as the victims of such threats” (JONAP, 2017: 21). In particular, the policy’s second pillar is devoted to achieving “the meaningful participation of women in preventing

radicalisation and violent extremism, as well as in national and regional peace building" (JONAP, 2017: 21). Women's contributions are especially depicted in function of their roles as educators within their family and in the society as a whole. Their agency is understood as strategic for three main purposes: "raise awareness […], teach correct religious concepts and values, and detect early warning signs of radicalisation" (JONAP, 2017: 22). To achieve this strategic goal, JONAP's logical framework proposes several initiatives both on the institutional and the community level, focused on training and relying on women's efforts in the prevention sector. It is important to notice that the strategy pays particular attention to gendered and religious norms' roles both in violent extremist groups' recruitment strategies and to the gendered entity of violent extremism itself (JONAP, 2017: 22). However, JONAP fails to properly address female terrorism. Overall, women are either described as crucial in the prevention efforts, or as victims of violent extremism, thus downplaying and overlooking women's actual agency within terrorist organisations. More specifically, when looking at the phenomenon of female terrorists and suicide bombers, the policy described them as "enslaved women and girls [that] have been used as human shields" (JONAP, 2017: 16), denying the possibility of women voluntarily joining terrorist organisations. The strategy's clear-cut separation between the sphere of prevention and countering terrorism suggests that the space of active terrorism is envisioned as predominantly male, and that women's agency as terrorist militants is almost non-existent. As such, it is of no surprise that JONAP does not recognise women's roles, nor does it provide for any initiative devoted to increasing women's participation in countering violent extremism.

4.2.3 Implementation and Impacts

JONAP's implementation process mainly depended on the civil society organisations' initiatives, and on the coordination and support provided by the Secretariat, an *ad hoc* structure established within the structure of JNCW. To ensure the timely achievements of the policy's strategic goals, a monitoring and evaluation system was implemented, through the cooperation of the National Coalition and the High-Level Steering Committee (JONAP, 2017: 24). The monitoring system was built on the performance indicators, outputs and proposed initiatives identified by the logical framework for each strategic goal. Similarly to the development process of the plan, it was based on a participatory approach, encompassing efforts from all governmental and civil society parties. Overall, the strategy cannot be classified as being merely symbolic, but rather it was mostly structured to achieve material results. This is particularly evident as JONAP's logical framework provides an estimated total cost for each proposed outcome under each strategic goal, demonstrating the Jordanian government's and the external actors' commitment and financial support for carrying out each initiative. Nonetheless, the provisions addressing cultural perceptions and changes around the concept of womanhood and its relation to the fields of peace and security were to an extent symbolic. In fact, despite the proposed course of action to achieve them, they rather represented long-term objectives and entail societal changes that cannot be reached in a short period of time.

Overall, the strategy has had a successful impact and managed to foster women's participation in the peace and security sectors. In fact, the number of female members in security services increased at different rates across the various agencies. The most significant result achieved was the percentage of Jordanian female peacekeepers in UN missions,

going from 3.6% in 2019 to 21.1% in 2020 (CanWaCH). As far as the implementation of the second strategic goal, 19 community-based initiatives were held to promote women's roles in preventing radicalisation and violent extremism, in which more than 800 women took part (UN Women, 2020). Not dismissing the actual impact raising awareness around women's roles in prevention has had and will have on Jordanian society, it constitutes only a partial contribution to gendering the field of terrorism, thus inhibiting the achievement of some of the UNSCR 2242 objectives. As long as women's participation in the peace and security sectors, and particularly in the terrorism field, is defined and limited by outdated gendered role expectations, its impact on security issues is bound to be limited (Fransen, 2022). Thus, as JONAP defines women's strategic advantages in preventing violent extremism solely based on their traditional roles as mothers and educators, untraditional but equally strategic modalities in which women could contribute to counterterrorism efforts are left out of the policy.

4.3 Findings and Conclusions

Both INAP and JONAP recognise the crucial and strategic roles women play in the sectors of peace and security, and they are aimed at enhancing and deepening them. However, the modalities in which the strategies were developed, and the ways in which the provisions addressed terrorism differ greatly. Whilst both the plans were developed and implemented through participatory approaches, the levels in which local civil society organisations were involved in the processes varied significantly, impacting the effectiveness of the NAPs. It is of vital importance that the priorities and the goals of the strategies reflect the needs and the issues of the society they are addressed to, otherwise the

implementation of the proposed initiatives will not produce the expected results. JONAP's high level of local women's organisations' involvement in the making of the plan and the consequent context-sensitive character allowed for the strategy to achieve important results in the peace and security field. On the contrary, due to the very limited participation of local organisations in the developing processes of INAP, the strategy lacked a comprehensive knowledge of the context-specific Iraqi women's needs and priorities, contributing to its shortcomings and the need to draft and implement the Emergency Plan. Particularly relevant were the strategy's failures in providing gendered protection needs following the rise of ISIS and the impending terrorist threat in Iraqi territories.

There are fundamental differences in how women's identity is portrayed by INAP and JONAP. Jordan's strategy paid attention to representing womanhood as independent and active in civil society, by never associating women with their male relatives, and by referring to them through their professional titles. On the other hand, Iraq's plan provides a fundamentally different characterisation of women, as never once are they acknowledged as professional figures in the public sphere, and they are repeatedly referred to with titles based on their relationships with male figures. Similarly, the two NAPs differ greatly in the ways they conceptualised women's agency. In fact, while both of them recognised the advantages of increasing women's participation in every sector of society, a comprehensive analysis of the modalities in which the strategies understand women's agency reveals substantial divergencies between them. JONAP provides context-sensitive accounts of both women in positions of power and with great agency, and women in vulnerable positions in need of protection. Thus, it portrays female agency not in an exclusive manner, but rather positioning it in the spectrum between full agents and completely passive individuals. On the contrary, in spite of its goals of enhancing female representativeness

and participation, INAP provides a static understanding of women's agency, as it mostly describes them in their passive status, referring to them as victims and in need of external aid.

The ways in which the two plans conceive women's identity and agency inevitably dictate the ways in which they address the intersections between women and terrorism. While INAP only briefly deals with terrorism's impact on women and women's involvement in terrorist activities, and mostly in legalistic terms; JONAP provides a more extensive analysis of the matter and addresses it in a dedicated strategic pillar. Despite the different extent to which the security issue is dealt with by the strategies, it is possible to reconstruct how women's identity and agency are understood and reproduced in counterterrorism efforts through the policies' provisions regarding female terrorism, and more importantly through the silences surrounding the matter. Based on INAP's conceptualisation of womanhood, it is of no surprise that women are envisioned as connected to terrorist activities as fundamentally non-agents. In fact, its provisions deny the possibility of female terrorists as they provide for gendered protections for the victims of terrorism and for the end of legal discrimination against the female close relatives of male terrorists. As the Iraqi strategy underplays women's agency in terrorist organisations and envisions the space of terrorism as fundamentally male, it denies as well any potential advantages in implementing a gendered approach to countering terrorism with active female participation. Differently, as it provides for a more nuanced understanding of female agency, JONAP recognises women both as the targets of terrorist activities and gendered terrorist propaganda, and in their strategic positions to significantly contribute to the Jordanian prevention efforts. As such, Jordan's plan only partially recognises female agency within the field of terrorism, still tying its counterterrorism strategy to gendered understandings of terrorist organisations. While

women's agency is recognised by virtue of their positions as educators and mothers in society, and utilised in the detection of early warnings of radicalisation, the possibility of women as militants within terrorist organisations is completely overlooked and denied. In fact, JONAP portrays female combatants in terrorist groups as "enslaved" and exploited by male terrorists as "human shields" (JONAP, 2017: 16), thus negating any possible modalities in which women would freely and rationally choose to become terrorists, and their consequent positions in terrorist organisations.

Not dismissing the differences found in the two NAPs, it is possible to identify and generalise a common approach to female terrorism in the region, based on the roles played by Iraq and Jordan - as one consists in one of the main theatres for the spreading of jihadi terrorism, and the other one has been heavily contributing to the counterterrorism fight in the area. Female terrorism is never envisioned as resulting from women's rational choices, but rather as deriving from kinship ties or targeted recruiting propaganda misrepresenting gendered and traditional norms. Women's agency as terrorists is almost non-existent. Either they are portrayed fully as victims and slaves of terrorism, or they are described solely by virtue of their roles as mothers, wives, and sisters, thus exclusively in correlation with the activity of male relatives. Therefore, the overall representation of women in terrorist organisations is of passive non-agents, who are submitted to male directives and authority, from the moment of their recruitment and throughout their permanence within terrorist groups. The resulting counterterrorism approaches are heavily tied to traditional understandings of gendered norms and conceptions. In fact, they are based on and reproduce gendered stereotypes for which it is not possible to collocate women in a violent environment, if not by representing them as victims. In addition, counterterrorism efforts are

grounded in gendered understandings of terrorist organisations, for which forcibly recruited women do not actively participate in public terrorist activities, but are mostly confined as non-agents in the private domestic sphere. Based on those representations of women's identity and agency, when addressing female terrorism, regional strategies' purposes are not linked to countering female terrorists' agency, but they are rather focused on providing for their gendered protection needs and for rescuing them from their captivity.

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation has investigated the realm of female terrorism in Arab, Muslim societies and the modalities in which the phenomenon has been addressed by national counterterrorism efforts. Despite the traditional and gendered identification of Arab women as victims of masculine terrorist violence, female militants, throughout the past two decades, have become active members of terrorist organisations, playing both combat and non-combat roles (see Khelghat-Doost, 2021). The dissertation has tackled the following research question: To what extent are gendered and religious norms in Arab, Muslim societies taken into consideration when addressing female terrorism in counterterrorism strategies? The significance of the research relies both on filling literature gaps on the issue at hand from a gender-based and context-sensitive perspective, and on uncovering policy-relevant implications in the field of counterterrorism. It has generated insights on the intersection between female terrorism and gendered religious norms, and in analysing national Arab approaches to the phenomenon, highlighting their gendered and context-blind aspects.

To reiterate, the first section of the empirical analysis has focused on analysing female terrorists' own perspectives and experiences, focusing particularly on the stories and first-hand accounts of Sajida al-Rishawi, Ahlam al-Nasr, Nada al-Qahtani, and Umm Anas (al-Hajiah). Through their testimonies and lives, and based on the exaltation of their persona in their social contexts, it was possible to reconstruct the models of female terrorism they represented, and to record how new applications of the gendered and religious beliefs have shaped the modalities of their agency. In line with recent scholarship (e.g., Bloom and Lokmanoglu, 2020; Erez and Laster, 2015), it has been shown an evolution of jihadist female militants' roles, as women have increasingly

held operative, public, and leadership positions. Yet, it has been demonstrated how women's novel agency cannot be re-conducted to their desires of self-emancipation from traditional gendered norms. On the contrary, terrorist organisations' and women's own understandings of their identities and agency have been closely linked with and reinforced the gendered values of honour, piety, modesty, and respectability. In short, it has been argued that the modalities of female terrorism have evolved not in spite of, but rather by virtue of new applications of traditional gendered norms. Thus, previous understandings and role expectations of female agency in terrorist organisations are no longer capable of capturing today's reality of the phenomenon: women are not exclusively identified by their male relatives, nor is their agency limited to their secondary and domestic roles as wives and mothers. Female respectability and piety are now to be found in women's combat deployment at the front-lines, as well as in their authoritative positions, and even in their brutal and violent agency. The implications of these findings go beyond the theoretical ground of understanding Arab women's identities and role expectations in terrorist organisation, and they represent the basis for the examination of local counterterrorism strategies. In fact, only with a clear depiction of the real operativity of gendered norms in female terrorism can counterterrorism efforts be evaluated in their gendered aspects.

Consequently, the dissertation has proceeded by analysing Iraq's and Jordan's NAPs for the implementation of UNSCR 1325, with the purpose of revealing their representation of womanhood and terrorist women. Through a thorough analysis of the contextual characteristics, the development and implementation processes, and most importantly the language and the provisions adopted, it has been shown how those strategies have overall represented the space of terrorism as male at its core, integrating women only as passive non-agents, as coerced into the

organisations and submitted to their male relatives' directives. As a consequence, elevating those findings as representative of the regional approaches towards female terrorism by virtue of Iraq's and Jordan's fundamental roles in the counterterrorism field, it has been argued that women's identity and agency within terrorist organisations have been heavily understood and reproduced according to traditional gendered stereotypes and role expectations. In fact, contrary to their general conceptualisations of womanhood, the strategies have envisioned women in terrorist organisations as fundamentally incapable of violent behaviours, victims of forced recruitment, and as enslaved to male authority. In addition, women are not conceived as independent agents of terror, but they have rather connected their positions and roles to those of male jihadis, as they have been identified as male terrorists' mothers, wives, and human shields. As such, the approaches are exclusively designed to provide protection and rescue women from terrorist groups, but are completely silent on the subject of female terrorism.

In short, it has been argued that female jihadism has undergone an evolutionary process, for which women's identities and agency are no longer tied to patriarchal understandings of traditional gendered norms, but rather, they have been re-shaped by new applications of the same gendered values and beliefs. Rather than being confined in their domestic roles and identities as mothers and wives, and not limiting their agency to the presence and the guidance of male relatives, terrorist women are now to be understood as full-agents, endowed with an independent agency, and able to enter and act in public spaces. On the other hand, generalising the findings from the analysis of Iraq's and Jordan's counterterrorism efforts, it has been demonstrated that the national responses to female terrorism are still heavily tied to traditional

gendered conceptions, failing to recognise and represent women in terrorist groups as anything else than victims and passive non-agents.

As a result, it is hereby highlighted a notable discrepancy between the nature of female terrorism and how the Arab national strategies have understood the phenomenon. To address the proposed research question, counterterrorism approaches in Arab Muslim countries have heavily built around traditional gendered norms, constructing through them the possible modalities in which women are allowed to enter the space of terrorism, and the consequent national responses. Yet, those gendered beliefs are not grounded on their current operativity, but rather on previous understandings. Female militants no longer abide by norms of female respectability and piety by remaining in the domestic sphere, identifying themselves as wives and mothers. Nor do they maintain their honour by limiting their entrance into the public sphere to the presence of a protective male relative, and by restricting their agency to modest and shy behaviour. On the contrary, terrorist women are now displaying those gendered religious qualities and values by doing their *hijra* without a male figure and leaving behind their families, by desiring and handling weapons on front-lines, by occupying leadership positions in terrorist organisations, and by enforcing the same qualities and values on other women with brutal force. Hence, the intersections between women and gendered norms assumed by the counterterrorism strategies are diametrically opposite to those exemplified by famous female terrorists' lived experiences: piety, honour and dignity are no longer to be found in the shy, modest wives, ready to take care of their husband and to give birth to the new generations of jihadi militants; rather, they are to be found in women like Umm Anas, whose respectability derives from the combination of authority and violence. While the re-significance of gendered beliefs in terrorist organisations has led towards the empowerment of women as full-agents of terror, the persistence of

previous meanings of the same norms have instead informed the conceptualisation of women in national counterterrorism measures either as passive non-agents or as enslaved victims.

The highlighted silences and gendered misconceptions relating to women's identity and agency have relevant implications, specifically on the implementation and success of those measures. In fact, as the policies have not adapted to the changing nature of gendered norms' applications to the social context, their understandings of womanhood in terrorist organisations raise questions regarding their effectiveness in addressing the security issue at hand. As long as female militants are not recognised as full-agents, the strategies will fail to provide for targeted early detection, prevention, and countermeasures. Importantly, the more national counterterrorism strategies are silent on the issue, and the more they ignore the phenomenon of female terrorism on the basis of previous applications of gendered norms, the more urgent and threatening the issue becomes. In fact, as scholars have recently argued, those gaps and silences regarding gender variables in counterterrorism policies only contribute to increasing women's strategic advantages in committing terrorist acts (e.g., Khelgat-Doost, 2021, Matusitz, 2019). As responses remain blind toward women's real identities and agencies and practical measures to counter their terrorist activities are not implemented, the overall Arab States' success in tackling the terrorism threat is severely affected.

Concluding the study, it is important to note that the purpose of the research was not to provide an exhaustive explanation of female terrorism and how it is envisioned and addressed by counterterrorism approaches, but rather to focus on the specific aspect of its intersections with traditional gendered norms. As such, the analysis has provided theoretical insights in often-neglected areas of study in the field of

terrorism, and it has highlighted policy-relevant implications in counterterrorism approaches. Moreover, taking into account the previously outlined limitations, this dissertation paves the way for further lines of investigation. There is a large scope for further context-sensitive and gender-based studies on gendered norms and the modalities in which they inform the realm of female terrorism, specifically based on data collected from participants, investigating their perceptions and understandings of the phenomenon. In addition, more research can be conducted in the examination of Arab national counterterrorism strategies' gendered aspects, broadening both the number of analysed cases, and evaluating different official documents, including Anti-Terrorism Laws, highlighting the lessons learned and the good practices across the countries.

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