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Women in the Islamic destructive cults – the example of Russia

Currently, the largest set of sects in Russia are the Islamists, who are represented both by small groups (up to a few dozen people), as well as by large groups (numbering over 100 thousand members each). Among them the most numerous and active are the sects of the Wahhabi type – “Islamic State”, “Caucasus Emirate”, a variety of Jamaats (religious, social and often military communities) in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia and other regions. In addition to the “classical” Wahhabi-Salafi formations, there are other destructive organizations, which can be identified, such as “Hizb ut-Tahrir”, “Muslim Brotherhood”, “Tablighi Jamaat”, as well as the pan-Turkic cults Nursi (the branch Mustafa Sungur) and Gülen. The total number of Islamists in Russia now exceeds 700 thousand people, with at least 200 thousand of them sympathizing with “Islamic state”. At the same time the membership of the once largest Russian cult – the Jehovah Witnesses – hardly exceeds 170 thousand people.

A few years ago Rosfinmonitoring (Russia’s Federal Financial Monitoring Service) started publishing a “List of organizations and individuals, in respect of which there is evidence of their involvement in extremist activities or terrorism”. As of May 6, 2016 it had 5737 entries, which, of course, is very far from listing all of the existing terrorists and extremists. However, this document is quite valuable for researchers, as for some time now the majority of individuals who committed crimes of terrorist or extremist character, have been included in the “List”. It also contains the names of people who have committed any offense that is legally equated to terrorism – for example, the creation of a particularly aggressive gangs, taking hostages and some other. The “List” gives the names of offenders, as well as their date and place of birth, however, it does not disclose the specific offences for which they have been sentenced or are wanted. The vast majority of those included in the “List” consists of Islamist males, but it is rather difficult to distinguish them from ordinary criminals without information on the corresponding articles of the Criminal Code.

The situation is much simpler when it comes the women included in the “List”. Though there are a few supporters of the fascist ideology among the female extremist, absolutely all of the 144 female terrorists and their accomplices are related to Islamist sects. It is noteworthy that 24 of them (i.e. 17% of the total number) are newly converted Muslims of various nationalities. These are Russian, Ukrainian, and even Jewish women, or women born in mixed marriages.

Research carried out by the author showed that the highest number of women terrorists or women who are terrorists’ accomplices belonged to the Wahhabi sects, among whom the proportion of supporters of the "Islamic State" is increasing rapidly. It is known without a doubt that 12 of the 24 listed female new converts are “Islamic State” supporters. Second to them come the supporters of the Wahhabi terrorist organizations of the North Caucasus, and third – the adepts of the terrorist party “Hizb ut-Tahrir”.

The reasons for the involvement of women in terrorist organizations differ significantly in the two main groups – the group of the so-called “ethnic” Muslim women and the group of the newly converted females. In the first case, the vast majority of women have joined the ranks of terrorists under the influence of family members (first and foremost – the husband). In the second case, the reasons are as follows:

1. Influence of friends – **28%**
2. Marriage – **25%**

3. Spiritual search – **13%**
4. Situations of stress – **12%**
Which include:
 - Falling in love – **6%**
 - Disease -**3%**
 - Divorce – **1%**
 - Suicidal thoughts – **1%**
 - Death of a close one – **1%**
5. Being charmed by the Muslim culture – **10%**
6. Influence of relatives – **6%**
7. Internet propaganda – **4%**
8. Rebellious moods – **2%**

Women who have become members of terrorist organizations are involved in different kinds of illegal activities. The most dangerous among these activities is when women become suicide bombers, and are therefore used as a living weapon. Many of the suicide bombers are widows of Islamist fighters, which is the reason they are often called “black widows” or “Shahida” (fem. for “Shahid” – martyr). Female suicide bombers were involved in many terrorist attacks in Russia, killing hundreds of people. The most famous among them are Hawa Barayeva, Zarema Muzhakhoyeva, Maria Khorosheva Alla Saprykina, Mariam Sharipova and Naida Asiyalova, while their total number reaches several dozens.

The most common activity among aggressive female Islamists is helping their terrorist husbands – harboring, fundraising or functioning as contact persons and messengers. Often they are also involved in the promotion and spread of their destructive ideology. This activity is most in demand – after all, a competent recruiter is much more valuable than the average fighter. Among the female terrorists specializing in the propaganda several stand out as especially effective: Maria Pogorelova from St. Petersburg, Christina Presnyakova from Voronezh and Daria Itsenkova from Astrakhan.

A special group of women terrorists consists of those who have moved to the territory of the “Islamic state”. The most attractive among them are used for the needs of the so-called "Sexual jihad" pleasuring local insurgents, the most intelligent are utilized in the propaganda, and the rest, which are a large majority, simply serve as laborers, and give birth to the future fighters of this terrorist organization.

Thus, out of all of the women involved in sects in modern Russia, the biggest threat constitute aggressive female Islamists. Experience, particularly the example of student Varvara Karaulova from the Moscow State University, shows that it is exceptionally hard to bring them back to normal life – perhaps harder than with the adepts of any other totalitarian sect.

This phenomenon has to be closely and diligently studied, especially in view of the fact that the proportion of newly converted Muslims among the terrorists has been steadily increasing.