CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE
DEFENCE AGAINST TERRORISM

GENDER IN TERRORISM AND COUNTERTERRORISM WORKSHOP: WOMEN, CHILDREN AND TECHNOLOGY

WORKSHOP REPORT
by the
NATO Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism

Gender in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Workshop:

Women, Children and Technology

29-30 April 2025

COE-DAT

Ankara, Türkiye

Dr. Merve Önenli Güven

Workshop Academic Advisor and Editor

Ms. Özge Erkan

Workshop Director

Ms. Sultan Erdoğan Yıldız

Workshop Co-Director

Ms. Elif Merve Dumankaya

Workshop Rapporteur

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE DEFENCE AGAINST TERRORISM

(COE-DAT)

DISCLAIMER

This workshop report is a product of the Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism (COE-DAT), and is produced for NATO, NATO member countries, NATO partners and related private and public institutions. The information and views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and may not represent the opinions and policies of NATO, COE-DAT, NATO member countries or the institutions with which the authors are affiliated.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

The sixth COE-DAT Workshop on *Gender in Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Women, Children, and Technology* was held in a residential format on 29–30 April 2025 in Ankara, Türkiye. The event brought together eleven distinguished speakers from six countries and forty participants representing eight nations, fostering a dynamic environment for dialogue and collaboration.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Director of COE-DAT, Colonel Halil Sıddık Ayhan, for his unwavering leadership and invaluable support throughout the planning and execution of the workshop. His strategic vision ensured that our efforts aligned with NATO's counterterrorism objectives and the broader Women, Peace, and Security agenda. My heartfelt thanks also go to our Academic Advisor, Dr. Merve Önenli Güven, whose scholarly guidance and insightful input greatly enhanced the academic framework of the workshop. Her expertise effectively bridged theory and practice, adding depth and rigor to the overall program.

I am especially grateful to the Workshop Co-Director, Ms. Sultan Erdoğan Yıldız, for her dedication, organizational acumen, and collaborative spirit. Her meticulous coordination and attention to detail were key to the workshop's success.

We were honored to host Ms. Burcu San, Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Operations at NATO Headquarters. Her keynote address provided a comprehensive overview of NATO's approach to integrating gender perspectives into terrorism and counterterrorism, offering valuable context for the workshop discussions.

Special thanks are due to Ms. Selvi Kahraman, COE-DAT CIS Specialist, for her technical expertise and calm professionalism, which ensured seamless logistical and operational support throughout the event. I would also like to acknowledge Ms. Elif Merve Dumankaya, our rapporteur, for her diligent documentation of the workshop proceedings.

Finally, I extend my sincere appreciation to all speakers and participants. Their diverse and distinguished backgrounds significantly enriched the workshop. Their active engagement and thoughtful contributions elevated the quality and relevance of the discussions, making the event both impactful and meaningful.

Ms. Özge ERKAN

Workshop Director

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AI	: Artificial Intelligence
CEDAW	: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
COE-DAT	: Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism
DAESH	: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ELN	: National Liberation Army
FARC	: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FLN	: National Liberation Front
FTFs	: Foreign Terrorist Fighters
IRA	: Irish Republican Army
LTTE	: The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MENA	: Middle East and North Africa
NATO	: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGOs	: Non-Governmental Organisations
OSCE	: Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe
PKK	: Kurdistan Workers' Party
PSYOPS	: Psychological Operations
PTSD	: Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
PVE	: Preventing Violent Extremism
RAF	: Red Army Faction
R&R	: Reintegration and Rehabilitation
SIT	: Social Identity Theory
UN	: United Nations
UNDP	: United Nations Development Programme
UNODC	: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
WPS	: Women, Peace and Security

Introduction

In the process of understanding the driving factors of terrorism, and establishing counter-measures against this issue, gender plays a crucial role in understanding the root causes of the problem. Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism (COE-DAT) organized its sixth workshop on Gender in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism with the subheading of "Women, Children and Technology" on 29 - 30 April 2025 in Ankara, Türkiye.

The aim of the workshop is to study terrorism and counter-terrorism issues from the perspective of the gendered impact of conflict. Terrorism is interpreted as "the most direct asymmetric threat to the security to international peace" by NATO. Based on the global and interconnected nature of terrorism, gender plays a crucial role in the form of conflict.

Based on this understanding and philosophy, the workshop was designed under the research questions of:

- Why do women take roles in terrorist organizations?
- How do women take roles in terrorist organizations?
- What kinds of roles do women take in terrorist organizations?
- What does it mean to be a "child soldier"?
- How do terrorist organizations exploit children?
- How are gendered narratives weaponized?
- What are the roles of women in facilitating the disengagement of others from terrorist organizations?
- What kinds of roles does technology play in the participation and recruitment processes of women and children in terrorist organizations?

One of the main aims of this workshop was to promote a space where case studies from various regions were discussed. In this way, experiences and perspectives on an interdisciplinary and global basis could be exchanged. Hence three main sessions were established in which under each session three topics were studied:

1. Women in Violent Extremist Movements: Roles and Psycho-Social Motivations
2. The Conceptualization of "Child Soldiers"
3. The Role of Women in Counter-Terrorism: Facilitating Disengagement, Socio-Political Influences, and Technology for Gender Equality

Under each session from NATO, UN, OSCE, and academia, fulfilling speakers made great contributions with their theoretically combined case studies. Our first speaker Assoc. Prof. Başar Baysal under the heading "Women's Roles as Recruiters, Perpetrators and Narrators of Ideologies in Terrorist Organizations" focused on women's involvement in terrorist organizations and armed groups by concretizing the situation with examples from FLN, FARC, Al-Qaeda, DAESH, Boko Haram, PKK, and RAF. Psychologist Aleksandra Puci as the second speaker presented her field study on Albania under the heading of

“Psycho-Social Motivations for Women to Take Part in Terrorist Organizations/Beyond Obedience: The Pyscho-Social Drivers of Albanian Women’s Involved into Religiously Motivated Terrorism”. Ms. Puci focused on how DAESH exploited the gender roles against women and why women were prone to this kind of exploitation by making psychological and social assessments. The last speaker of the first session was Dr. Almakan Orozobekova with her heading “Foreign Female Terrorist Fighters: Recruitment and Re-Integration Challenges” presented the situation from the perspective of Central Asian countries by touching upon all the dimensions of the recruitment issue and re-integration programs with their challenges.

In the second session, I contributed with my presentation “Child Soldiers or Abused Children by Terrorist Organizations” with the case study of the PKK. I discussed the “child soldier” conceptualization and focused on how and why terrorist organizations prefer to use this term in the involvement of children by concretizing the subject and giving examples from the PKK. The second topic with the heading “Children Recruitment Strategies of Terrorist Organizations” was presented by Dr. Mathew H. Charles. His presentation focused on the questions of how and why terrorists and extremist groups recruit children. Dr. Charles contributed the subject from the Colombian case by specifying recruitment models that are the results of his long-term field studies in the region. Our third speaker Dr. Elisabeth Schleicher made her presentation on “Weaponised Gendered Narratives” by focusing on how these narratives are used by terrorist organizations by giving solid examples from Al-Qaeda, DAESH, Chechen groups, and LTTE.

In the last session of the workshop, Ms. Anna Amelie Morel made her presentation with the heading “The Role of Women in Facilitating the Disengagement of Others from Terrorist Organizations”. She explained the role of women in the prevention of violent extremism by giving specific examples from the field based on her expertise. The last presentation of the third session is presented by Dr. Murat Koçanlı under the heading of “Analysing Social, Political, Economic and Psychological Factors in the Establishment of Counter-Terrorism Measures”.

Dr. Koçanlı contributed to the subject with the book project he and his colleagues titled “Children Driven to Terrorism: The Case of PKK Terrorist Organization” in which the social, political, economic, and psychological factors were analysed and explained in detail through the example of the PKK. The technological dimension of the issue was studied during each presentation and discussion session. In the discussion sessions with their insightful and fulfilling moderations and their valuable contributions based on their expertise, Dr. Richard Warnes and Mr. Alec Wargo made great contributions to the workshop.

In this report, the presentations are not only presented as summaries, but also, during the presentations, all the covered subjects and points are included in order to provide a comprehensive understanding and perspective on the topics with the aim of contributing to the studies of the researchers, practitioners and policymakers.

Dr. Merve Önenli Güven

Workshop Academic Advisor

Welcoming Address

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is both an honour and a privilege to welcome you to the COE-DAT here in Ankara, for this important workshop on "Gender in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: Women, Children, and Technology."

As the NATO Counter-Terrorism Department Head, COE-DAT is committed to advancing the Alliance's efforts through inclusive and effective strategies. Integrating gender perspectives into counter-terrorism is not just a principle—it is a necessity for long-term impact.

In line with NATO's 2024 Policy on Women, Peace and Security, and its Policy on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, this workshop seeks to deepen our understanding of how gender intersects with the dynamics of terrorism and violent extremism.

Throughout the workshop, we will explore:

- The roles, motivations, and experiences of women within terrorist organizations,
- The exploitation of children, particularly how gendered narratives are weaponized to manipulate and recruit and,
- The dual-edged role of technology, both as a facilitator of radicalization and as a tool for countering violent extremism and promoting human rights.

This event is not only an academic exercise, but also a space for policy-relevant dialogue, experience-sharing, and network-building that can inform future practices and strategies across NATO and partner nations. I am confident that the insights generated here will contribute meaningfully to our collective efforts in addressing terrorism in all its forms, and in building more inclusive, resilient, and secure societies.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to all our distinguished speakers and participants—from academia, international organizations, and the military—for their invaluable contributions to this workshop. In particular, it is a distinct honour for us to welcome Ms. Burcu SAN as our keynote speaker. Her presence and leadership in this field greatly enhance the value and relevance of our discussions. We are truly grateful for her support and engagement in this important initiative.

Thank you once again for your participation and commitment. I wish you a productive and inspiring workshop.

Halil Sıddık AYHAN
Colonel (TUR A)
Director, COE-DAT

Keynote Speech

Ms. Burcu SAN, NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Operations

Hello everyone, my name is Burcu San, I am the Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Operations at NATO Headquarters. Today I want to discuss gender perspectives in terrorism and in the fight against terrorism. I will also talk about children, armed conflict and terrorism.

But let me first give you a sense of NATO counter-terrorism policy work. In 2024, for the first time since they were adopted in 2012, NATO's Policy Guidelines on Counter-Terrorism were revised and adapted to the evolving threat landscape while reflecting the most recent technological trends.

We also updated our Action Plan, the document containing the practical work to be implemented. Both documents stress the importance for NATO to adopt a comprehensive approach, promote human rights and, of course, the rule of law. They also integrate the Women, Peace and Security agenda and human security aspects in our counter-terrorism work.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, or WPS. 2025 is also the 10th anniversary of one of the subsequent Resolutions on WPS, 2242, which explicitly links the WPS agenda to countering terrorism and violent extremism. For this reason, it is very timely that NATO's Policy on WPS was also updated and endorsed by NATO Heads of State and Government at the Washington Summit last year.

Instability, crisis, conflict, and post-conflict situations have distinct and disproportionate impact on women and girls: this was once again recognised by our updated WPS Policy.

This is also true for terrorism, as it distinctively impacts the safety and security of targeted women and girls. In many parts of the world, it affects their access to basic social services too – such as education and health. Terrorism also affects their ability to participate in public and political life, as well as in peace and security processes.

Furthermore, NATO recognises that women are often at the forefront of efforts to support societal resilience, to mediate and to respond to crises and conflicts, and to build peace.

Women are also agents of change, including in counter-terrorism. Against this backdrop, I will highlight three points from the updated NATO Women, Peace and Security Policy, which specifically pertain to terrorism and counter-terrorism:

The first point is the diversity and complexity of roles that women may play in terrorist groups. They may be supporters, recruiters, informants, strategists, fund raisers or fighters. Whether voluntarily, by deceit or by force.

An important part of the counter-terrorism efforts at NATO consists of raising awareness and understanding, including on this aspect. Considerable work has already been done on this topic by the broader counter-terrorism community. This includes data collection and analyses of women's roles in a broad spectrum of violent extremist and terrorist groups, in particular in relation to female foreign terrorist fighters. Nevertheless, there is a continued need for data collection and analyses and integration of findings in counter-terrorism efforts.

The second point is that terrorist organisations have the capability to inspire, direct, and train women and girls, alongside men and boys. One aspect of this capability is the effective use of gendered narratives in propaganda and recruitment efforts by terrorist groups. The internet provides a pervasive platform for this. Similarly, technology is instrumentalised by terrorist groups to train their operatives – for instance training that uses virtual reality.

The third point I want to highlight is that women play diverse roles in identifying and responding to evolving security threats and challenges, including terrorism.

These three points have implications on the development of appropriate tools for countering terrorism.

For example, NATO offers capacity building courses to our partner nations, including those in the Middle East & North Africa region. While doing so, we actively encourage women's participation. This is in line with the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which advocates for women's wider role and contributions to security.

NATO is currently working with the United Nations Office for Counter Terrorism on a Handbook and E-Learning course on gender, and counter-terrorism threat assessment and management. This tool will integrate the strengths and unique experiences of both organisations, and it will be available for civilian, law enforcement and military counter-terrorism staff and practitioners.

Let me mention here NATO's Human Security agenda as well. Civilians, including children, are being targeted in armed conflict by state and non-state actors, including terrorist organizations. Their safety and security are being leveraged to serve military objectives.

NATO's Policy on Children and Armed Conflict aims to provide an integrated policy framework to prevent, monitor, report and respond to violations or abuses against children in the context of NATO missions, operations and activities.

I will point out two main considerations on NATO's approach to children and armed conflicts.

Firstly, the recruitment of children in armed forces or armed groups, including terrorist organizations, violates international law. When such children come into temporary custody or

are handed over to NATO operational contexts, they should be considered primarily as victims of international law violations.

This applies in all cases, even if they are not deemed appropriate for immediate release and reintegration. The treatment of children should also be gender-responsive, age-sensitive, and in conformity with international law. The responses to their situation need to put the victim at their centre, and be cognisant of the trauma that the children suffered.

Secondly, the violations and abuses against children rarely occur in a vacuum, and have devastating impacts on societies. Moreover, there are linkages between human trafficking, including children; conflict-related sexual violence; terrorism; organised crime; and armed conflicts.

Furthermore, the use of technology, including artificial intelligence, by malicious actors aggravates the vulnerabilities of different population groups.

Understanding how these interlinkages and vulnerabilities compound and interact is crucial in designing meaningful responses to terrorism affecting women, children, and survivors of trafficking and conflict-related sexual violence.

In this context, I want to commend the work of the Defence Against Terrorism Centre of Excellence. Their work is crucial to increase our awareness and analyse terrorism and counter-terrorism by integrating the perspectives of men and women. Indeed, the centre has become a crucial platform to analyse the most recent trends by integrating gender perspectives across their programme of activities. This contributes to retaining attention on these angles within the Alliance and among our partners.

To conclude, in light of some of NATO current work I mentioned, I can only emphasise how important it is to continue talking about women, children and also technology when tackling terrorism.

Thanks for listening.

Presentation Summaries

Session 1-Women in Violent Extremist Movements: Roles and Psycho-Social Motivations

Women's Roles as Recruiters, Perpetrators and Narrators of Ideologies in Terrorist Organizations

Assoc. Prof. Başar BAYSAL, Ankara Bilim University

Women's involvement in non-state armed groups is not a new thing. We have seen women active in the militant movement globally since at least the mid-20th century. For example, during Algeria's independence, female National Liberation Front (FLN) militants smuggled bombs into European districts of Algiers because French troops did not suspect them. Dozens of Algerian women successfully planted bombs during the *Battle of Algiers*.

By the late 20th century, in European insurgencies like Northern Ireland's Irish Republican Army (IRA), women actively participated in the activities. By the 1980s, some women even took leadership positions in this group. There is an important point in the 1990s, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka used female suicide bombers. Actually, the killer of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was also a female Tamil Tigers member. In Chechnya, the Black Widows also conducted devastating suicide attacks.

These historical cases showed that when we come to the 21st century, women have long been recruits, recruiters, fighters, and propagandists for extremist groups. The 21st century shows that women's role in terrorism they both expanded. After 2001, terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (DAESH) first had strict gender norms. Women were told their duty was to marry fighters and raise the next generation, but not to fight. But in time, reality forced adjustments. For instance, Al-Qaeda in Iraq conducted attacks with female suicide bombers. Mostly because the military forces usually hesitated to search women, and it was exploited by the group.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram the terrorist organization took this to an extreme level between 2014 and 2018. They deployed hundreds of girls and women as human bombs. This was mostly enabled by mass kidnappings and coercion, showing women being instrumentalized on a massive scale. Meanwhile, DAESH also recruited women from around the world. These women were used mainly as propagandists. However, by 2017, as DAESH was collapsing, it issued so-called *"fatwas"* encouraging women to take part in the active fight. Globally, only in 2017, 181 female militants conducted suicide attacks, which were about 11% of these attacks.

Why do terrorist organizations use women as recruiters? Because it is easy for terrorist organizations to discover women often make highly effective recruits. Culturally, women sometimes have access to places and communities where men do not. In traditional societies, for example, only women may attend certain gatherings like women's prayer groups or mothers' meetings. For example, it is easier to recruit a women's tea circle which brings more than expected future members. There is also the element of trust and low suspicion. Security forces mostly focus on young men; a woman distributing extremist pamphlets or making contacts is less likely to be on the police radar.

Additionally, in recruitment, gender-specific appeals also matter. A woman recruiter might present joining an extremist group as proof of sisterhood, empowerment against the patriarchal enemy, or even romantic fulfilment. DAESH, for example, exploited the female recruiters of the most promising young girls and the utopia of marital happiness and religious purpose. Finally, the internet also amplified women's recruiting roles.

For example, a 19-year-old girl from Glasgow travelled to Syria and joined DAESH. Once she became an online recruiter, she used social media to reach other girls back in the United Kingdom and other places. Her blog posts mixed every life, like recipes or poetry, with extremist messaging. Crucially, she painted a romantic picture of life under DAESH. The impact of this kind of effort was significant. Over 550 Western women joined DAESH, and many of them were influenced by this through online channels under the name of 'sister recruiters', and this also led to the globalization of the group itself.

There are also examples from Africa and beyond, and not all female recruiters are sitting behind the keyboard. Many of them were faced with the ethnic grassroots level. In Nigeria, Boko Haram used women as covert recruiters, and some of these recruiters were previously kidnapped girls. For example, a woman might arrive in a village pretending to be a display person or a traveling trader. She will be invited to stay with local families and share Boko Haram's teachings and even convince local girls to join the group. These fresh recruits would bring the group security or revenge against the government. For instance, in Somalia, al-Shabaab terrorist organization uses similar tactics. Additionally, women have arranged marriages between young women and al-Shabaab fighters.

In the Northern Ireland conflict, many Irish Republican Army (IRA) volunteers will tell you their first indoctrination came at home. During the troubles, many mothers, sisters, or wives in Republican communities recruited male relatives by normalizing radical ideology at home through storytelling and encouraging sons to join the cause. Across these cases, what stands out is the woman's ability to radicalize within personal relationships, a form of recruitment that is quite patient and very effective.

The second role of women is being perpetrators. Historically, many assumed women in terrorist groups were just cooks, nurses, or messengers. However, numerous examples prove that women can be active combatants and killers. In fact, women have taken part in nearly every kind of terrorist attack. Technically, groups find females very useful because women can often slip through defences. This often allows women to get closer to the targets. Terrorist leaders know that the female terrorists are not just to kill, but to generate a level of legitimacy.

One of the most dramatic forms of violence by women is the suicide attacks. It is both devastating and also a good tool for propaganda. This trend of using women as suicide bombers was very common in Chechnya, by the Black Widows, also in Sri Lanka by the Tamil Tigers, and in Nigeria by Boko Haram. In Colombia's Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Peru's Shining Path, 30 to 40% of fighters were female, and some of them served as combat squad members.

There is a trend of hybridization. All politically oriented terrorist groups are now getting involved in criminal activities. They are doing smuggling; they are doing illegal economies, so they become hybrid-armed groups. There is also another trend. When these criminal groups get stronger, try to influence politics, they try to influence the local politics, or they try to change the mayor for their benefit. Therefore, there is also a reverse trend of hybridization. This reverse standoff utilization.

Beyond recruiting and fighting, women play a crucial role in these organizations as narrators of ideology. In other words, they are also propagandists and spokespersons. There are a few reasons for choosing women for these roles. First, women can provide a softer and more relatable image to the brutal movement, thereby legitimizing the group message. Female propagandists also have educational or journalistic backgrounds. One of the main examples for this is Ulrike Meinhof, from the Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany. She used to be a journalist before she co-founded the RAF. Second, woman propagandists are very effective at targeting female audiences. Also, female ideologues often try to bridge the gap between the group's violent actions and its social aims. In essence, women as narrators have extremist groups sound more legitimate and compelling. They humanize their causes, connect with half of the population, mainly women, and inspire the next wave of recruits.

In 2015, DAESH woman brigades in Raqqa released a manifesto outlining women's role touch promoting marriage at young ages, motherhood, and supporting fighters. Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, an influential female ideologue who authored articles in DAESH's Arabic magazines, celebrated female martyrs and urged women to take up supportive roles. Her writings provide an emotional and sisterly appeal and frame brutality in nurturing terms. Even Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula briefly ran "Al-Khansaa",an online magazine for women, advising women to raise their children for fight and support their fighter husbands. This shows armed groups' recognition of the need for a female-centric narrative to perpetuate their cause.

In the digital era, we have seen the rise of what we might call extremist influencers, and many of them provide a stark example. These women normally share ordinary and daily content on household tasks like cooking and cleaning. However, they also praise white supremacy, conspiracy theories about white genocide, and an anti-immigrant stance. A similar trend is also conducted by female DAESH bloggers in videos or blogs related to similar daily routines. They also hide messages and propaganda about their ideology.

All these modern examples highlight a common strategy. These groups use approachable female figures to make extremist ideologies seem a natural part of everyday life. It's a kind of trojan horse approach to propaganda. Many groups instrumentalized women,

using them as tools to further their groups' interests, rather than truly empowering them for equality's sake.

One aspect of this is legitimacy. There are two types of legitimacy. The first is formal legitimacy, and the other is moral legitimacy, and both are important for politics. Furthermore, it's also related to moral power, as constructivists argue, power is not only about material power. It is also about moral power. This is also evident in the women's recruitment. They can gain admiration and state that their cause is just. They do this to be able to reach more media comments. They sometimes even romanticize their so-called cows by including women.

There is an obvious instrumentalization of women in terrorist organizations, for recruitment or tactical gains, as women are used as suicide bombers since they are less suspicious. Hence, the instrumentalization of women for gaining sympathy and legitimacy becomes a core issue. However, when terrorist organizations are evaluated through their daily practices or content, it is seen that most of these organizations are still what they are. There are still patriarchal roles in the groups, in the mountains.

There is also the dark side of exploitation, which is that some groups abuse their female members. They are being raped. They cannot even control their own bodies. They have to use birth control pills; they are forced to have abortions. They have to become the wives or lovers of the group leaders to save themselves from the rape of other members.

Another proof of instrumentalization is observed in demobilization processes. After most peace processes, many groups want women to go back to their traditional roles. The expectation is to return to the kitchen since they are not useful anymore. In even in some cases, women were not even considered "ex-combatants".

For example, PKK and its affiliates are famous for their feminist propaganda. However, in PKK, male leaders have tight control over women's personal agency. It is still recruiting underage individuals. Additionally, despite many women in its ranks, PKK's top command for decades was almost exclusively male. Therefore, PKK's feminism is an ideological camouflage. However, they are still gaining sympathy by putting the female terrorists on the front pages. This is clearly a patriarchal exploitation and is at odds with any claim of equality. Many also said the patriarchal rules were still ongoing in the camps.

In the context of the FARC, 80 to 90% of demobilized expat women have been forced to have at least one abortion. Some of them, maybe many of them were raped when they were underage. This is again the clear patriarchal exploitation. Many also said that the patriarchal roles are still ongoing in the camps.

Finally, the inclusion of women is a strategic and insincere move, and this is pink washing by terrorist organizations. Using women's inclusion is similar to how greenwashing is used by companies to appear eco-friendly while polluting behind the scenes.

Beyond Obedience: The Psyco-Social Drivers of Albanian Women's involved into Religiously Motivated Terrorism

Ms. Aleksandra PUCI, Psychologist/Researcher

Between 2012 and 2015, thousands of foreign fighters joined DAESH, including an estimated 550 Western women. Among them were approximately 190 women from the Western Balkans, with around 26 identified as Albanian. The Western Balkans emerged as a significant recruitment ground for DAESH, largely due to socio-economic instability, weak state institutions, and a widespread erosion of trust in public systems. The involvement of Albanian women, in particular, highlighted a growing trend that challenged conventional assumptions in counterterrorism, especially regarding gender roles. Many of these women travelled to conflict zones alongside their spouses or to reunite with family members, with their decisions shaped by a complex interplay of psycho-social and cultural factors.

Mostly in Albania, the dominant idea is that women have been involved in violent extremism due to the influence of males. However, it is not always a result of obedience, but it is also a matter of personal justification to take action. In Albania between 2012 and 2015, there was an increase in female presence in terrorist and violent extremist groups; it is estimated that at least 144 Albanians joined DAESH. 26 of 144 terrorists were women. Six of these women lost their lives in the conflict zone. The real number is not clearly known.

In terms of the Albanian case, the involvement of women in the organization has never been a common experience but something new and unexpected. Before DAESH, the country had never experienced such cases. It was very challenging for Albanian public institutions to tackle this problem.

In the participation process, there was an interplay between psychological vulnerabilities, socio-cultural factors, and patriarchal norms, which establish the psycho-social motivations. During the participation process, motives in terms of identity struggles, trauma, and gendered expectations also contribute to radicalization. Findings also show that most women were passive participants shaped by family dynamics, emotional needs, and socio-economic hardship. There are even personal crises or childhood experiences that make women vulnerable to exploitation or manipulation by these terrorist organizations.

Motivation has a significant role in the participation process. Motivation is the internal and external forces that stimulate and direct an individual's behaviour towards achieving goals and fulfilling needs. Motivation is the driving factor that urges us to take action. While psychological factors include beliefs and emotions, which significantly influence individual motivation and behaviour, social factors include relationships and cultural expectations that shape how individuals pursue their goals and aspirations. The interplay of factors represents

the influence of an individual's behaviour, desire, and commitment toward achieving certain goals or engaging in specific activities.

In Albania, socio-economic instability, post-communist institutional weaknesses, and the erosion of public trust have created fertile ground for extremist recruitment. This vulnerability is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and limited opportunities for women persist. This ideological shift generated confusion and emotional dislocation, especially among women navigating the tension between modern societal expectations and traditional gender roles.

This paradox created both ideological confusion and emotional dislocation, particularly among women who were caught between modern expectations and traditional roles. Even after migrating to European countries, many found themselves torn between two conflicting pressures: on the one hand, the host society encouraged them to embrace modern values and autonomy; on the other, patriarchal norms within their own communities continued to demand adherence to traditional roles.

Gender norms and impartiality are still dominant in Albanian society. In 2022, a study on Albanian women showed that these women do not consider gender equality as a core value. Rather, they find the role of being '*a wife*' or/and '*a mother*' to be more important. These perceptions are internalized beginning from an early age, fostering an emotional dependency and a lack of autonomy. The reason is that women are expected to behave according to the norms of society.

Hence, extremist propaganda, particularly that of DAESH, effectively exploited this cultural backdrop by offering women a structured sense of purpose and belonging that echoed—but also intensified—the traditional roles they had long inhabited. This ideological congruence made the group's radical message appear less foreign or extreme, and instead as a continuation of familiar societal expectations framed in a new context.

Having prior experiences of trauma, including parent loss, emotional neglect, personal crisis, or domestic abuse creates vulnerabilities. For example, in the case of emotional neglect, in a patriarchal society, the parents do not care too much about the emotional world of the child. They only give orders and set the strict rules, and children are just expected to be at the disposal of their parents. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to create a clear identity during adulthood. These early experiences increase the possibility for these women to be more vulnerable and open to extremist manipulation. Women raised under these conditions become increasingly susceptible to extremist propaganda, often finding themselves powerless in the face of narratives that exploit their existing vulnerabilities and unmet needs. Living under fear and chaos urges these women to seek only security and stability.

The rise of female involvement in religiously motivated terrorism is rooted in a complex constellation of structural, psychological, and ideological factors. Patriarchal social systems and the misinterpretation of religious teachings contribute to the marginalization of women, particularly in contexts marked by economic hardship and psychological vulnerability. While some women are coerced or manipulated into joining extremist groups, others are driven by a desire for purpose, dignity, and clearly defined roles within a community. These motivations often intersect with personal crises and emotional needs,

forming multifaceted pathways to radicalization. The influence of deeply embedded social schemas and persuasive ideological narratives further facilitates this process by reframing traditional gender roles within a religiously legitimized context. As a result, women raised in such environments become especially susceptible to extremist propaganda, often finding themselves unable to resist its appeal.

The radicalization of women within religiously motivated terrorism can be better understood through a psycho-social lens that emphasizes the interplay between individual emotional experiences and broader social dynamics. Psychological theories suggest that terrorism is not solely a product of ideology or environment but is also rooted in deeply personal processes. For many women, experiences of trauma, grief, loss, and emotional vulnerability serve as catalysts for radicalization. These unresolved emotional wounds can create a psychological void, which extremist narratives strategically exploit by offering a sense of belonging, purpose, and emotional validation. Thus, past emotional experiences are not merely background factors but are often directly linked to the mechanisms through which radicalization occurs.

Terrorism is based on the psychological processes of the individual and is influenced by emotional, existential, or identity-based concerns. Women, especially, are more likely to be driven by personal motivation. Factors such as trauma, grief, loss, and emotional vulnerability contribute to the increase in radicalization. The impact of past emotional experiences—particularly childhood trauma, neglect, and abuse—plays a critical role in shaping susceptibility to radicalization. When such experiences are coupled with a lack of coping mechanisms, such as social support or emotional resilience, the risk becomes even more pronounced. The absence of healthy outlets for processing pain and adversity can exacerbate feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and vulnerability, thereby creating a psychological landscape in which extremist narratives can take root more easily.

Unaddressed trauma—particularly when experienced early in life—can have profound psychological consequences, including diminished self-worth, lack of autonomy, and persistent feelings of guilt and shame. For women, these emotional burdens may lead to heightened vulnerability to radical ideologies. It is therefore essential to closely examine individual personal histories and emotional experiences when seeking to understand the motivations behind female radicalization. Without such an in-depth, empathetic approach, the underlying drivers of their engagement with extremist groups risk being overlooked.

From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (SIT), which posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from their group affiliations. When women feel alienated, marginalized, or excluded from mainstream society, they may actively seek *belonging* and *identity* within alternative social structures. In this regard, DAESH proved particularly effective in offering women a clearly defined role—as mothers, wives, or moral guardians—within a utopian vision of a religious state. This promise of purpose and status, embedded in a collective identity, made the group's narrative especially appealing to those struggling with personal dislocation or societal rejection. This theory explains why many Albanian women, who faced marginalization or isolation within their communities, found a sense of validation in the structural promises offered by such groups.

The Need for Significance Theory suggests that individuals are drawn to terrorism as a way to restore meaning and self-worth in their lives. This resonates strongly with the narratives of women who experienced emotional loss, humiliation, or feelings of insignificance in their personal lives. In these cases, radical groups function as sources of empowerment and moral clarity, compensating for real or perceived deficiencies in their social environments.

Another theory is the Role of Social Schemes and Gender Norms. Social schemas—cognitive frameworks that help individuals interpret and respond to social cues—are particularly important for understanding the decisions of women in patriarchal societies. According to Kaneko et al. (2021), women may internalize roles such as '*the obedient wife*,' '*the mother of the caliphate*,' or '*the protector of religious purity*,' which align closely with DAESH propaganda. For Albanian women raised in traditional settings, such schemas normalize male dominance and familial obedience. Joining DAESH thus becomes an extension of pre-existing expectations rather than a radical deviation. As a result, their participation often appears justified within their own cognitive frameworks, even if it leads to physical danger or moral conflict.

Group Dynamics and Emotional Bonds state that radicalization does not occur in isolation. As Sageman (2004) and Taylor and Louis (2004) highlight, group dynamics—including friendships, kinship ties, and charismatic leadership—play a crucial role in reinforcing extremist ideologies. For women, these social connections are often mediated by emotional bonds with spouses, family members, or rarely online communities. These interpersonal dynamics help sustain belief systems, particularly in emotionally vulnerable individuals. For example, emotional dependency on radicalized spouses often reinforces decisions to migrate or participate, even when ideological conviction is minimal.

It is interesting to note that Albanian women who departed for conflict zones were mostly between the ages of 20 and 30, and all of them were married. Therefore, the assumption that they left for multiple purposes does not hold true in the Albanian case, as most travelled with their husbands and children. Only five of the women were between 40 and 50 years old, and some of them joined family members—such as their children—already in the conflict zones, intending to support them. Additionally, several women were married between the ages of 16 and 20, which is a critical period for forming a core identity. For many, having a husband was perceived as a central component of that identity. Most of these women came from rural areas and had low levels of formal education. This demographic profile reflects lower socio-economic status, patriarchal control, and emotional dependency.

Women's decisions to join DAESH can be understood through the lens of both push and pull factors. On the one hand, poverty, limited opportunities, patriarchal control, and a sense of powerlessness or insignificance pushed many toward radical alternatives. On the other hand, the promise of a better life under DAESH, religious fulfilment, and a longing for structured family and spiritual belonging served as powerful pull factors. While some women agreed to travel primarily to accompany their husbands or reunite with children, others actively supported the ideological cause, driven by a belief in the utopian vision of the caliphate.

However, it is still evident that most women agreed to travel primarily for the sake of their husbands and children. Yet, others actively supported the ideological cause, genuinely believing in the utopian vision of the caliphate. When asked why they went, these women often gave simple answers: "*Our husbands told us it would be a magical land, a pure place—this dreamland. It was our last chance, our final hope*." For them, that land symbolized a paradise, something to believe in during times of hopelessness.

Many women also supported their husbands' roles as fighters. When it is asked one of them whether she had seen the videos circulating in that region—videos showing their husbands killing others—she replied, "*Yes, we saw them, but we didn't care*." What mattered most to them was feeling safe; they were not concerned with what their husbands did or didn't do. These women accepted their roles within DAESH's household structure, where the promise of safety was inextricably tied to a system sustained by violence.

In conclusion, the radicalization of Albanian women cannot be explained by a single factor but rather by a dynamic mix of motivations. Personal trauma, emotional vulnerability, patriarchal oppression, and socio-economic deprivation all contribute to the decision-making process. Family dynamics play a dual role—often acting as both a source of coercion and a foundation for psychological identity, shaped by adverse childhood experiences and emotional neglect. The attraction to religiously motivated terrorism is further fuelled by a lack of alternative identities or support systems, along with the perceived promise of an Islamic utopia. Reintegration efforts, therefore, require a long-term commitment to psychological and social transformation. From a policy perspective, countering violent extremism must extend beyond traditional security approaches to address the deeper structural and emotional roots of radicalization.

Foreign Female Terrorist Fighters: Recruitment and Re Integration Challenges

Dr. Almakan OROZOBEKOVA, OSCE Network for Women Professionals on P/CVERLT, OSCE Academy, Project and Training Specialist

Similar to many other countries, Central Asian ones have been affected by the phenomenon of foreign fighting. As we all know, it is estimated that over 40,000 individuals were recruited and mobilized to join violent extremist and terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq. Among them, approximately 5,000 originated from Central Asia – a figure comparable to that of foreign fighters from Western Europe.

As of today, only a handful of countries – among them the four Central Asian ones: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – have launched humanitarian operations to bring back mostly women and children, surpassing the number of repatriates brought back by other countries. More than 2,000 individuals (both women and children) have been repatriated by the four Central Asian states since 2019.

Recruitment of Central Asian women into the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq often occurred through complex, multifaceted channels, sometimes involving coercive mechanisms. Targeting methods were effectively applied by the terrorists and violent extremists. These groups mostly exploited friendship and kinship networks. Furthermore, human trafficking was also used as a means to bring people to the conflict zones, including women. In addition, online contact was quite effective in reaching out to people and providing guidance on how to travel to Syria and Iraq. However, the issue of online radicalization is peripheral in the case of the Central Asian countries.

Another finding that is not discussed much relates to the parents, especially mothers, who were desperate to arrive in Syria to bring their children – sons and daughters – back to their home countries. But they themselves became trapped once they met their children and could not get them out.

Also, recruitment pathways often involved women following their husbands into the conflict zones. The organizational strategies of DAESH and similar groups leaned heavily on exploiting familial and emotional bonds. They adopted a "whatever means necessary" approach to recruitment, systematically utilizing traditional family structures and societal expectations placed on women to draw them into conflict zones. Emotional manipulation and promises of a better future – combined with limited education and lack of access to reliable information – made many women particularly vulnerable to such tactics.

Moreover, deception played a significant role in the 'forced recruitment' of women who were initially promised jobs but were later trafficked. This indicates that, in addition to voluntary recruitment, human trafficking based on false promises was also a significant tool used by terrorist groups.

Overall, in my analysis of recruitment patterns, I have divided recruitment into two models: agency and dependency. Agency explains the cases of women who were drawn to the terrorist organizations for different reasons, be it ideological, romantic or many others, but based on their decision. These women sometimes could recruit or facilitate recruitment of other individuals and participate in propaganda campaigns. However, they are the minority. For the majority of the women, recruitment was based mostly on dependency – many followed their husbands. They were forced to go by their husbands, expected to go, or followed voluntarily. Interestingly, the logic of dependency can also be observed further in the repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of women.

Upon the territorial defeat of DAESH, the repatriation of women to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan was particularly noteworthy not just for its scale, but also for its framing. Women were largely presented as 'individuals who happened to be in difficult life situations' through a rhetoric of victimization, which facilitated their placement under state-led rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Very few women were prosecuted; some were placed on probation, while others were pardoned or granted amnesty. This framing, though effective in garnering political and public support for repatriation, risks downplaying the complexity of women's roles in the conflict zones – especially in cases where they had acted with agency.

Rehabilitation and reintegration programs focused on providing a range of services, including psychological counselling, medical, theological, and legal support, as well as assistance with housing and vocational training. However, the pace and degree of support vary from country to country, along with the level of engagement from local civil society and international organizations. In the countries with better economic development, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, some women also received housing either from state agencies or from religious institutions.

Although initial support – including legal, medical, and theological assistance – was provided to repatriated women upon arrival, the process of reintegration continues to face challenges. Socio-economic hardships remain a key problem, with some women facing difficulties in securing employment and stable housing. Administrative obstacles, such as obtaining legal documents like death certificates for spouses and children who died in conflict zones, add further complications to legal proceedings and limit access to essential services and social assistance. Additionally, women have not been assessed for potential treatment involving medication for mental health conditions such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This gap is understandable, given the high costs of such programs and the limited funding available for medical support, particularly for PTSD.

Stigmatization also looms large. Returnee women, especially in smaller villages, frequently face suspicion and social exclusion in their communities. They are often perceived as potential security threats, which creates an environment of alienation. This, in turn, can exacerbate identity crises and feelings of non-belonging on the one hand. On the other hand, there are cases of women who want to leave their country and thus do not want to be reintegrated, but instead create an image of being reintegrated by depicting behavioural change. Yet, it is very challenging to measure cognitive change – the shift from radical to

moderate and tolerant beliefs. Working with beliefs requires long-term engagement and sustained programs implemented by both governmental and civil society organizations.

In light of these challenges, the reintegration process in Central Asia has adopted a learning-by-doing approach. Long-term success will depend on sustained political will, continued investment in community-based programs, and international support – in particular, in the following areas: 1) capacity building for both women returnees and those who work with them; 2) development and implementation of evaluation and monitoring programs; and 3) sustainable projects and programs supporting reintegration efforts.

Session 2
The Conceptualization of "Child Soldiers"

"Child Soldiers" or Abused Children by Terrorist Organizations

Dr. Merve ÖNENLİ GÜVEN, National Intelligence Academy (Türkiye)

Childhood is defined as a period during which individuals are immature, unable to think logically, and incompetent. Therefore, developmental psychology defines a child as an individual in the process of development. In this context, childhood represents a period in an individual's life where protection is needed within the scope of purity and vulnerability. Here, it is worth referring to the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that a person under the age of 18 is a child.

Why and how do terrorist organizations recruit children? One of the most important features of terrorist organizations that makes their physical existence possible is human resources. When the human profile structure of terrorist organizations is examined, it is observed that especially young individuals are preferred in recruitment. One of the main reasons for this is that young people have more areas of exploitation, they are more prone to manipulation and are easier to control within terrorist organizations. Terrorist organizations make use of children in many different roles within their organizational structures, based on the vulnerability of children and the fact that children's behaviours can be more easily indoctrinated than adults.

How do terrorist organizations recruit children? In addition to coercive methods such as kidnapping and coercion, manipulative methods are also used against children. In particular, migration movements caused by situations such as civil wars and children who lose their parents in these processes become targets for terrorist organizations. For children in insecure environments, an organizational image is created in the minds of children to perceive the internal order of armed structures as safe spaces where they can be protected. This is the main reason that explains why and how the children can be easily indoctrinated by terrorist organizations. In this way, the image of the organization, which is established through authoritarian and oppressive methods, enables the child to adopt the rule-driven behaviours of the organization. Children become the subjects of an environment where cultural norms and beliefs are shaped through the element of violence.

As the case study of this presentation, when PKK was established, the founder of the terrorist organization stated that "While other organizations in other countries started with 300 guerrillas and grew to 10,000, we started with 300 and still have only 1,500." The terrorist leader emphasized that by abducting children, the terrorist organization aimed at securing a continuation for the human resources. With the decision of the III. Congress held in 1986, PKK decided to take at least one child from each family to the mountains under the so-called

"*compulsory military service law*" to increase participation in the PKK. When the recruitment profile of the PKK is examined, it is seen that children under the age of 18 constitute the basis of its recruitment strategy.

Although the PKK claims that the children joined the organization voluntarily, when the stories of the children who were recruited are examined, it is seen that they joined the organization as a result of being introduced to the organizational existence of the terrorist organization and the manipulation, pressure and intimidation techniques used against them. After the transfer of children to rural areas, the punishment system within the organization comes into play and psychological and physical violence is systematically inflicted on the child until the individual identity is broken with the identity of the organization.

According to the UN, Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International and Kurd Watch; "*With the Syrian civil war, the PKK/PYD-YPG systematically abducted children between the ages of 12-17"*. Report on Children and Armed Conflict published by the UN (November 15, 2013) also refers to the same thing: "*Children are assigned to checkpoints and allowed to participate in armed conflicts, and children have lost their lives in these processes.*"

When the light is shed on the children in the PKK, it can be easily recognized that there have been a lot of crimes committed against the children such as:

- Child abduction,
- Use of pressure, intimidation and threats against children,
- Psychological abuse of children,
- Child labour in harsh conditions,
- Sexual abuse of children,
- Psychological and physical torture of children,
- Maltreatment of children as punishment,
- The deployment of children to the front lines of conflict,
- Killing of children.

Hence, the discussion on the concept of "child soldier" requires further attention to draw some definitional boundaries between the two terms: *a child* and *a soldier*. A child is an immature person who has not completed his/her physical, mental, and emotional development, whereas a soldier is a person who has a specialization that requires professionalism in line with specific skills.

The difference in the emergence and perception of the "child soldier" conceptualization is based on the change in cultural perception that has occurred in the historical process. In periods of civil wars and struggles for independence, the positioning of children in society was different. Children's participation in wars has been one of the main factors in shaping the concept of "child soldier". However, the conditions with the terrorist organizations are not the same. The use of "child soldier" term creates a high risk and possibility in the legitimization of children abuse through accepting the involvement of children in terrorist organizations as voluntarily.

In this context, the concept of "child soldier" is shaped on the assumption that individuals under the age of 18, who are systematically planned to participate in organized structures of terrorist organizations are volunteers. Children who are made to take part in any conflict environment are exposed to adult abuse and crimes are committed against children who need to be protected and whose physical and emotional characteristics are at the forefront on the basis of being weak and dependent.

The concept of "child soldier" is a discursive tool used by terrorist organizations to gain legitimacy. In this context, it reveals a problematic conceptualization. This is because the concept of "child" refers to an immature, simple-minded individual in the transition period from infancy to youth, who has not fully completed his/her physical, mental and emotional development, while the concept of "soldier" refers to a person who has a certain level of skill to fight.

A child who is in between infancy and adolescence does not complete his/her psychological, physical, emotional and mental development does not have the capacity to use and develop systematic violence. Therefore, children are terrorized by naming them as "child soldiers". It is not rational to accept children to be willingly in an armed conflict because they do not complete their emotional and physical development, and they are not rational actors. In the process of ensuring the forced involvement of children in terrorist organizations, children are mentally, emotionally and physically abused.

The use of such a definition also leads to ignoring the real situation of children who are subjected to all kinds of physical, psychological, emotional and sexual abuse by terrorist organizations. The recruitment of children by terrorist organizations is a crime. Hence, it is important to concretize how children are victimized and become victims of terrorist organizations.

Furthermore, the "child soldier" definition causes the child to normalize his/her presence in the organization and hinders the visibility of the victimization of the child and the crime committed by the terrorist organization. On this basis, such kinds of definitions used against children also lead to the construction of a cultural language of violence.

The presence of a child in a terrorist organization and the attempt to make sense of it through concepts such as "child soldier" causes the violation of the most fundamental rights of the child to be ignored. By attributing the elements of voluntariness and will to the situation in which the child is involved, the victimized child is criminalized. The situation of children in terrorist organizations that forcibly hold and exploitation of children is a version of modern slavery. On this basis, the presence of children in terrorist organizations should be studied in the context of child abuse.

Children Recruitment Strategies of Terrorist Organizations

Dr. Mathew H. CHARLES, Universidad del Rosario

How and why do terrorists and extremist groups recruit children? Recruitment is strategic, diverse, and contingent; it depends on the local context. There are a number of roles fulfilled by children involved in those groups. There is a need to be careful, but not just about the term, child soldier, but the use of child and childhood. Especially in the Colombian context, even though some children are recruited, most are adolescents, and lumping children and adolescents in the same category, especially when agency issue is considered can be problematic.

There is a dichotomy in the theory, such as push and pull factors. Does it depend on the armed group or what are the reasons that push children into armed groups? This could also be the victim-perpetrator dichotomy. It is important to consider the agency of young people, however limited that agency might be. Young people have agency, and they are deeply politicized and dehumanized.

There are three specific forms of recruitment and specific methods of recruitment used in conflict zones in Colombia. These three types, or modes, are strategic and predatory or expedient and tactical. They depend on the relationship with the community. In Colombia, there are armed groups, guerrilla factions, some have an established endowment. Endowment refers basically to the relationship with the community. There are some communities in Colombia where the state has effectively been replaced by control of the armed; therefore, it is referred to that as an established endowment.

They have stayed the armed group; the non-state armed group has stable territorial control because there is no presence of the military. There is no presence of the police, there is very little state presence. Furthermore, they have absolute control of the community, sometimes with the support of the community. There are then contexts where a challenge occurs because the state is trying to take back its territory, either in the long term or though specific military operations, or it might be more common between two specific armed groups which means they only have partial territorial control and the control over the residents. The population is antagonistic.

Since the demobilization of the FARC in 2017, there have been a number of armed groups that have emerged, fighting and competing to take over the space left in the kind of FARC-shaped vacuum. They have been fighting for territorial control. Again, that leads to antagonistic control over the population. This usually involves some kind of extortion; however, there will be laws set in place by the armed group. Then, tactical recruitment refers to a situation where territorial control and social control are not specifically the objective of the non-state armed group. For example, after the post-2017 FARC peace process, there are

several groups that have taken over the FARC's share and illicit trafficking of drugs, through the Amazon to Brazil. They have created new routes, but to get through the Amazon, they need to recruit teenagers from indigenous Amazon communities to help them navigate the jungle. Therefore, they do not care about territorial control or social control. They just need to get their drugs from A to B, and they often use indigenous teenagers to do so because they have knowledge of the difficult terrain. Yet again, that leads to these three specific types of recruitment:

Strategic Recruitment is planned recruitment, carried out when armed groups have established territorial and social control. It aims to sustain and expand the group over the long term through ideological indoctrination, socialization activities, family ties and activists, enlistment, reinforcing governance and legitimacy.

Predatory or Expedient Recruitment is urgent, opportunistic recruitment used during periods of rivalry, territorial contestation, or military pressure. It focuses on rapidly replenishing fighting capacity through coercion, deception, and manipulation, reflecting the immediate survival needs of the armed group.

Tactical/Short-Term Task-specific Recruitment is linked to operational or logistical objectives.

Predatory or expedient models relate to kidnapping. The kind of forced recruitment where a child is taken from their family and forced to become a member of an armed group. In Colombia, there are studies carried out periodically every eight years that have mobilized children from armed groups. The number of children who say they were kidnapped or abducted into becoming a member of a non-state armed group is really low, something like 15%. The majority of young people join through other means, and that can often be fake job offers or false promises—i.e. the promise of a motorbike, the promise of a basic salary can be enough to convince a young person that this is something that they want to do with their lives and they learn very quickly that that was a mistake. Young people can be offered a motorbike and then they are told that they have to pay for this motorbike. Therefore, now they become the part of an armed group.

On the other hand, there is a lot of seduction, as well. Older teenagers of both sexes, males and females, are being deployed to schools. In Colombia, the education system is quite specific in that sense. If a student fails a year, he/she has to repeat it. It is not uncommon, and non-state armed groups exploit that. As a matter of fact, they use 20/21-year-olds to recruit and seduce younger teenagers.

The tactical form relates more to specific missions. Again, a lot of FARC dissident groups arriving in indigenous communities in the Amazon specifically and they will organize a party on a Friday night. They will get the young people drunk and then take two or three of them with them and force them to navigate through the jungle. So, this is referred to as kidnapping, alcohol intoxication, seduction, and blackmail. This is something that we have seen used with social media. The same thing applies to the social media context. They will use

older teenagers to seduce younger teenagers, build up a relationship with them online, convince these teenagers to share intimate photos, and then they will threaten to publish those intimate photos with their family, their friends and the rest of the community. And that can be used to then blackmail this young person into joining the non-state armed group.

This also refers to a kind of collective agreement subcontracting, which is another phenomenon. In Colombia, the nexus between armed conflict and organised crime has always been blurred since the 90s and more so since the 2017 peace process. Street gangs that do not really have any links to armed conflict at all, but especially since 2017, it is seen an explosion of various armed groups competing for the gap that is left by the demobilization of the FARC. They are co-opting and recruiting entire gangs into criminal dynamics. Obviously, there are gender factors. The toxic masculinity is very much related to why some young men/young teenagers may feel that a life in an armed group offers them some kind of solution.

There is a three-level approach to digital radicalization and there are some mechanisms. One is low threshold engagement, which is the kind of first contact, young people being contacted by extremists or terrorists via the use of messaging, WhatsApp, Facebook, but it is an initial contact to strike up a bond. The point is to build some kind of emotional connection that can then be exploited and manipulated further.

The next mechanism is grooming and normalization, which involves more indoctrination—i.e., sharing of literature, sharing of ideology, and building upon that emotional bond that was created in the first place, and then encrypted radicalization, which is private channels that are much harder to trace for the authorities, and maybe even task-related. Dissident factions of the FARC or the ELN give specific tasks to young people through telegram and other social media services as a kind of test. Then they will even wire them money. This is something that is a huge issue at the moment in Colombia.

In conclusion, this is about recruitment being more than forced. It is multifaceted. In Colombia, this is something relatively new, and it is a massive problem which is about digital radicalization. Most recruitments were face-to-face in Colombia. Now, there is an estimate that around 70% of recruitment is done digitally. Therefore, this is a huge issue that the Colombian Government they are grappling with because there's no real strategy as yet to run these digital techniques. In Colombia, the recruitment strategies of the armed groups depend on ideological, emotional, cultural, and structural factors. Therefore, effective prevention requires addressing root causes in addition to military interventions.

Weaponised Gendered Narratives

Dr. Elisabeth SCHLEICHER, Kosovo Force (KFOR)

Weaponized gendered narratives refer to the use of gender-related stories or ideas in a way that aims to manipulate, control, or harm others. This can involve promoting stereotypes or using gender-specific language or roles to create division or reinforce power dynamics. Often, it is about using these narratives in a way that supports a particular agenda or marginalizes certain groups.

In other words, weaponized narrative is the use of information and communication technologies to create and spread stories intended to subvert and undermine an adversary's institutions and identity. It operates by sowing confusion and political and social schisms. It is an emerging domain of asymmetric warfare. It builds on previous practices, including disinformation, information warfare, psychological operations (PSYOPS), fake news, social media, propaganda, and other practices and tools, and it draws on advances in fields such as technological advances in domains such as social media and artificial intelligence (AI).

How do terrorist organizations use gendered narratives? Terrorist organizations often use gendered narratives that reinforce gender roles. Terrorist organizations have long exploited gender roles. However, military organizations are still doubting or not understanding why a gender perspective is crucial.

Photographs of these terrorist organizations are often, but not always, portraying men as violent fighters and women as supportive, non-violent figures, which can be used to justify violence and recruit members. By portraying men as inherently violent and women as inherently peaceful, terrorist groups can justify violence as a masculine act and portray their actions as a defence of their gendered identity or ideology.

In some cases, terrorist groups have used women as suicide bombers, framing this act as a way for women to achieve martyrdom and contribute to the cause. In the early 2000s, during the Chechen-Russia conflict, the Chechen insurgents increasingly resorted to terrorist attacks. The attacks were characterized by female suicide bombers who the press named 'Black Widows' because many had lost their husbands during the conflict. These women are not unique; other terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda, also employ females as suicide bombers. The presence of female suicide bombers shows that women are not only passive actors in times of conflict. However, there is no exact 'type' of woman that commits such attacks; different female suicide bombers can come from different societal positions. It is essential to note that female suicide bombers or terrorists, whether male or female, are not connected to any particular religion. One of the first known attacks dates back to 1985 when a teenage girl drove a bomb-laden car into an Israeli defence force in Lebanon.

On the other hand, some groups emphasize the role of women as mothers and wives of fighters, portraying them as essential to the group's survival and continuity. Women may also

be used in support roles, such as logistics, recruitment, or fundraising, which are often seen as less visible but crucial to the group's operations. These narratives can be used to recruit and radicalize individuals, particularly women, by framing their participation in the group to fulfil their perceived gender roles or contribute to the cause.

Some individuals, including both women and men, become associated with terrorist groups voluntarily. However, others become associated with terrorist groups as the result of coercion. Terrorist groups recruit women, men, girls and boys against their will in a variety of ways, including by abducting them; making threats against them, their families or communities; or relying on spouses or other family members to coerce them. There is strong evidence, however, to suggest that, in some contexts, the rate of involuntary recruitment is much higher for women than for men. Such a contrast may be a manifestation of broader gender inequalities, including the existence of unequal power relations between women and men.

A UNDP report published in 2017 highlights the disproportionately high percentage of women who were coerced into joining terrorist or extremist organizations, including Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab and DAESH. 495 respondents indicated that they had voluntarily joined a violent extremist group, with women accounting for 12% of those respondents. 78 respondents indicated that they had been recruited by force by a violent extremist group, with women accounting for 53% of those respondents. This gendered distribution is consistent with a later 2023 UNDP study. The findings of this 2023 study show again a higher proportion of women and girls in the forced group category (46%) vs the voluntary group (13%).

Terrorist organizations understand the importance of gender and gender stereotypes well. They often exploit gendered narratives to recruit children and women by appealing to specific roles and expectations within their societies. They also try to seek people through tailored recruitment, such as looking for frustrated men in societies and tailor recruitment strategies accordingly.

Terrorist organizations use the notion of male hyper-aggression and the "enslavement" of women to men to entice males to the organization as a place where those frustrated males can meet the expected gendered norms for a man. DAESH successfully recruited educated young men, offering all the traditional things of "manhood" (job, wife, money, power) that these men wanted to have. Similarly, they reached out to women, "liberating" them from the "beauty-oriented" West. All these things were attractive to women as they were disillusioned by the gendered expectations of them in Western societies. Women are used as recruiters of both males and females.

For instance, the narrative of DAESH was "Women in the West do not have rights, and women can reclaim their rights with us". Several women who believe and feel that they do not belong to the society they are living in joined DAESH due to their narratives towards women. Women are also great recruiters for DAESH on social media and calling for their "sisters" to meet their "roles" to populate the state as baby factories.

DAESH also uses women to recruit males by calling on males to be "men" and defend the women who have joined DAESH, as well as question their "manhood" since women are fighting because they were not "man" enough. The move to recruit women into terror organizations is a pragmatic decision to regain the strategic advantage.

Gendered narratives by terrorist and violent extremist groups are also used to acquire legitimacy. DAESH emphasized the importance of women in building a true community for the faithful. They not only encouraged the presence of women and children in their territories but also developed a strong propaganda campaign, appearing to highlight women's voices, and thereby attempting to legitimize their narrative of building a community and not just a terrorist group.

One example is that of Aqsa Mahmood, a 19-year-old young woman from a wealthy Scottish neighbourhood who left her family in 2015 to join DAESH and then motivated other young, and even much younger women to follow. Aqsa glorified life in the DAESH controlled territory. Her motivations appeared grounded in both religious rhetorics, on one hand, and base materialism, on the other – as she flaunted the homes and goods seized from local citizens and handed as rewards to those making the journey. In an entry on her social media blog, she spoke about how DAESH loyalists would receive a house with free electricity and water provided to you due to the Khalifah (the caliphate or state) and no rent included. Another example is the British Twins. In 2014, British twins Zahra and Salma Halane publicly honoured the anniversary of the September 11 attacks in the US through social media posts; they celebrated violence against the West.

Gendered narratives were not, however, only targeted at women; men and boys were also the mark of narratives cantered on traditionally masculine roles of fighting for and taking care of their communities. Groups like DAESH used notions of shame and narratives of emasculation to incentivize men and boys to join the cause; they were taunted by narratives that challenged their sense of self or abilities to meet the cultural expectations of men in certain contexts.

Imagery glorifying battle and narratives leveraging women's interests in perpetrating violence were intended to persuade young men to get involved. The availability of "sex slaves" was also highlighted as an incentive. Toxic notions of masculinity and the gamification of violence, where recruitment propaganda was often styled after popular video games, using their catchphrases and imagery, most often resonated with young men.

The next example is from The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE in Sri Lanka, up until their military defeat at the hands of the government in 2009, famously trained female suicide bombers. Recruitment efforts targeting women particularly emphasized opportunities to escape hierarchical cultural norms and traditions and to assume a diverse array of roles, including as fighters.

Boko Haram also portrays women as victims of Westernization and corruption, and to justify its violence against women. Boys have been forced to attack their own families to demonstrate loyalty to Boko Haram, while girls have been forced to marry, clean, cook and

carry equipment and weapons. Recruitment of girls contributes to the "normalization" of the groups, increases the groups' attractiveness for future recruits and demonstrates the groups' state-building capacity. Women presented terrorist groups with opportunities to evade security measures.

What can we do to tackle the problem? The participation and contributions of women to terrorism and violent extremism, as well as in war and conflict, are not new. Women have played an important role in heightening the visibility and reach of groups with extremist agendas. What is new in terms of the approach adopted by DAESH, and increasingly among groups promoting or enabling violent extremist views, is the prominence given to women's voices and gendered narratives. The spread of technological innovations and social media, and the access these give to individuals to create and amplify content, will likely continue to facilitate this trend. Addressing weaponized gendered narratives in war, conflict and terrorist organizations requires a multi-faceted approach.

1. Increasing the number of women in the security sector and "counter-speech" or "counter-narrative" campaigns to address the gendered narratives and messaging from terrorists and violent extremists will remain critical.
2. Education and Awareness: Promote education that challenges stereotypes and fosters critical thinking about gender roles. Encourage discussions that question and deconstruct harmful narratives.
3. Inclusive Dialogue: Encourage inclusive dialogue that involves diverse perspectives, including those of women and marginalized groups, to ensure that all voices are heard and respected.
4. Media Literacy: Promote media literacy to help people critically evaluate and recognize biased or harmful narratives in media and propaganda.
5. Support for Affected Communities: Provide support to communities affected by conflict, ensuring that aid and interventions are gender-sensitive and address the specific needs of all individuals.
6. Advocacy and Policy Change: Advocate for policies that promote gender equality and protect against the misuse of gendered narratives in conflict situations.

By taking these steps, the impact of weaponized gendered narratives can be reduced.

Session 3
The Role of Women in Counter-Terrorism: Facilitating Disengagement, Socio-Political Influences, and Technology for Gender Equality

The Role of Women in Facilitating the Disengagement of Others from Terrorist Organizations

Ms. Anna Amelie MOREL, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Violent extremism that leads to terrorism poses a serious threat to international peace and security. The progression to violent extremism is often a journey marked by marginalization, lack of opportunities, and grievances with the state, but it is not confined solely to these factors. It is important to identify the problem, but what matters more is how to address it. UNODC works with Member States to support them with responses to prevent crime, including violent extremists leading to terrorism. The need here emerges to contextualize factors, contextualize them with history, with cultural differences and we also take these into account from the perspectives of national, regional and societal/community levels.

In this sense, prevention efforts really help to understand also the different impacts that terrorism and violent extremism have on different genders and how differently they affect men and women. Prevention of violent extremism (PVE) takes many different areas into consideration to actually build a more resilient society towards terrorism. Prevention involves proactively addressing the social, economic, and political factors that contribute to the radicalization of individuals.

Why do we actually need to include women in the voting efforts? Because it really helps with having an effective answer to the problem. However, it is important to note that women have always had a significant role. In terms of the traditional roles, we cannot underestimate the role of women in the family. They are considered open as primary caregivers and in charge of education. This position really allows them to be at the centre of, or to be actually the person who can identify, the first signs of radicalization. They can see, recognize them if they are empowered and educated. They can even support the legal authorities to tackle this threat. They are also very good at countering extremist narratives because they can educate the children to recognize the radicalization processes, but also to just share more positive narratives of peace within the household.

In terms of women's role in the communities, women can be very influential in empowering social cohesion and facilitating dialogue. It is often more at the grassroots level, which is actually a good thing when we talk about PVE. Therefore, engaging women really

helps to have a value to reach the community from within and to help with bridging the gaps between different layers of society. Their role in both family and community helps women emerge as good mentors and models.

Even if the inclusion of women in intervention programs is always a beneficial aspect, women continue to face numerous persistent and structural challenges. These are as follow:

- Gender based discrimination and social norms,
- Lack of gender mainstreaming,
- Lack of representation in decision-making,
- Self-censorship and limited confidence in public spaces,
- Limited access to education,
- Lack of institutional support for women's initiatives.

In many contexts, programs are not gender-sensitive, meaning they often fail to consider how strategies for PVE impact women and men differently. Women are also frequently underrepresented in decision-making processes, which leads to unequal outcomes. The lack of female participation not only limits the visibility and influence of their voices but also affects broader representation. When women are excluded from these spaces, it becomes harder for other women to step into the public sphere, express their opinions, and claim their rightful place in shaping strategies and solutions. Even when policies are designed to create space for women, they may hesitate to take it due to internalized self-censorship. Therefore, it is equally important to work with women to build their confidence and demonstrate that they have valuable contributions to make. Empowering them to believe in their own voice is a crucial part of ensuring their active and meaningful participation.

The UN has long acknowledged this issue, yet integrating a gender perspective remains limited. However, it is important to recognize that there are several key instruments in place. One of the most significant is the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which emphasizes the inclusion of women in peacebuilding and security processes. This convention is followed by Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace, and Security and 2242 (2015) on the critical role of women in preventing and countering violent extremism. These documents explained well the benefits of including women. It encourages states to include women in the team for conflict resolution. With other instruments, we need to consider the inclusion of women when we are talking about security, which also supports the human rights concerns.

States actually tackle the terrorism problem through a whole-of-society approach. UN also pays great attention to this term. It means that to actually understand the phenomenon correctly, we need to include all of the different actors in the society that are remotely connected to the public. It means including everyone in the government, not only the security sector, but also different ministries such as education, religious affairs, along with the communities, civil societies, NGOs, academics, psychologists, private sector and so on. It is only with this broad vision and by compiling all the expenses of everyone that we can actually address the problem.

At UNODC there is the TPB initiative - Regional Network of Practitioners. This is implemented in different parts of the world, such as Southeast Asia. All of the networks have been developed in close cooperation and consultation with states and regional experts to address the specific needs of each region. Each network includes a domestic working group that focuses on the region's particular priorities. It's especially interesting to see how their structures vary based on these differing needs. For example, in the Sahel, there's a strong focus on education and socio-economic opportunities, while in South Asia, the emphasis is more on addressing issues like digital radicalization. So, the topics we work on are shaped by the unique challenges of each region. But in general, the initiative still serves the same overarching goal: to enhance regional cooperation—not only between states, but also among various active actors across different sectors. The aim is to bridge the gap between governments and civil society. To create a network is targeted. This network includes government representatives, NGOs, social workers, and broader civil society. Within this network, connection with one another, participation in meetings, and engagement in programs that promote the exchange of good practices on how to address terrorism effectively.

Community-based integration efforts, especially those targeting women, are particularly valuable in case of reintegration and rehabilitation (R&R) programs. Community-based reintegration should be seen as a continuation of the rehabilitation process. Without it, it becomes difficult to ensure long-term impact—both on reintegrating families and on former foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). By including women in this process, their involvement also allows to better prepare communities for reintegration. Civil society should play a key role in this, supporting women-led efforts to strengthen social cohesion more broadly.

This part of the population also requires psychological care and general empowerment. Community-based reintegration efforts, when built upon governmental actions, have proven to be highly effective—not only in supporting returnees but also in reducing the risk of re-radicalization. If the communities are prepared properly and the collaboration with civil society is sustained, then they can monitor and support reintegration over the long term. This way, even five years later, if a person shows signs of re-radicalization, the community/women will be equipped to respond quickly and effectively.

A pioneering initiative that integrates female religious leaders in Mauritania—Mourchidates, which is a religious guide responsible for deconstructing radical discourse and PVE—into national efforts to PVE. These women play a critical role in countering extremist narratives from within their communities and are actively engaged in mosques, schools, and prisons.

Another project worth mentioning is by the NGO Women Without Borders. They run a small-scale initiative that works locally, engaging directly with people on the ground. The training they provide is often delivered in English and takes place in communities at high risk of radicalization, especially in very patriarchal societies where women have limited access to education. Their work focuses on providing basic education and building women's confidence. After several intensive weeks of training, the participants come together to share and strengthen their understanding of key PVE concepts, such as how to recognize signs of radicalization and how to effectively address them.

Analysing Social, Political, Economic and Psychological Factors in the Establishment of Counter-Terrorism Measures

Dr. Murat KOÇANLI, Baskent University

This presentation aims to contribute to the development of preventive measures against terrorism-related child abuse by identifying the factors that contribute to or prepare children for joining terrorist organizations.

Although there are numerous studies on the use of children by terrorist organizations in international literature, the number and scope of studies conducted in Türkiye are limited. This research project contributes scientifically to the limited national literature on children involved in terrorism, based on official data. The importance of the research lies here by introducing a concrete study with significant data.

For the methodology of the research, the project progressed in four main stages. Firstly, the conceptual framework was put forward, then the official data was transformed within the framework of the determined codes, and the main scope of the report was formed. Finally, the transformed data was analysed by means of the SPSS program.

The literature review was based on a conceptual framework that was formed in four basic stages:

1. Legal Framework of the Problem of Children Drawn into Terrorism,
2. Reasons Why Terrorist Organizations Exploit Children,
3. The Impact of the Internet on Children's Involvement in Terrorism,
4. Psychological and Sociological Dimensions of the Problem of Children Drawn into Terrorism.

The term "child soldier" is preferred in national literature, but it raises controversy due to its legal implications. The concept of "children dragged into terrorism" is used to avoid legal connotations and consider children's mental development and vulnerability. The use of child soldiers, prevalent since the early 19th century, has increased with the proliferation of armed conflicts worldwide. Terrorist organizations like the PKK have been using children for decades, using them in combat and propaganda. The PKK, in particular, has increased its use of children in propaganda activities for a long time. Terrorist organizations use child soldiers for their ability to evade capture and lenient legal consequences. Child soldiers, despite their perceived vulnerability, are used in various roles, including combat and support functions. Terrorist organizations use child soldiers viewing them as cheaper to control. Child soldiers are used for intelligence gathering due to their ability to gather information more easily than adults.

Non-state armed groups and terrorist organizations exploit children due to their vulnerability and ease of manipulation. These groups use children to achieve their goals,

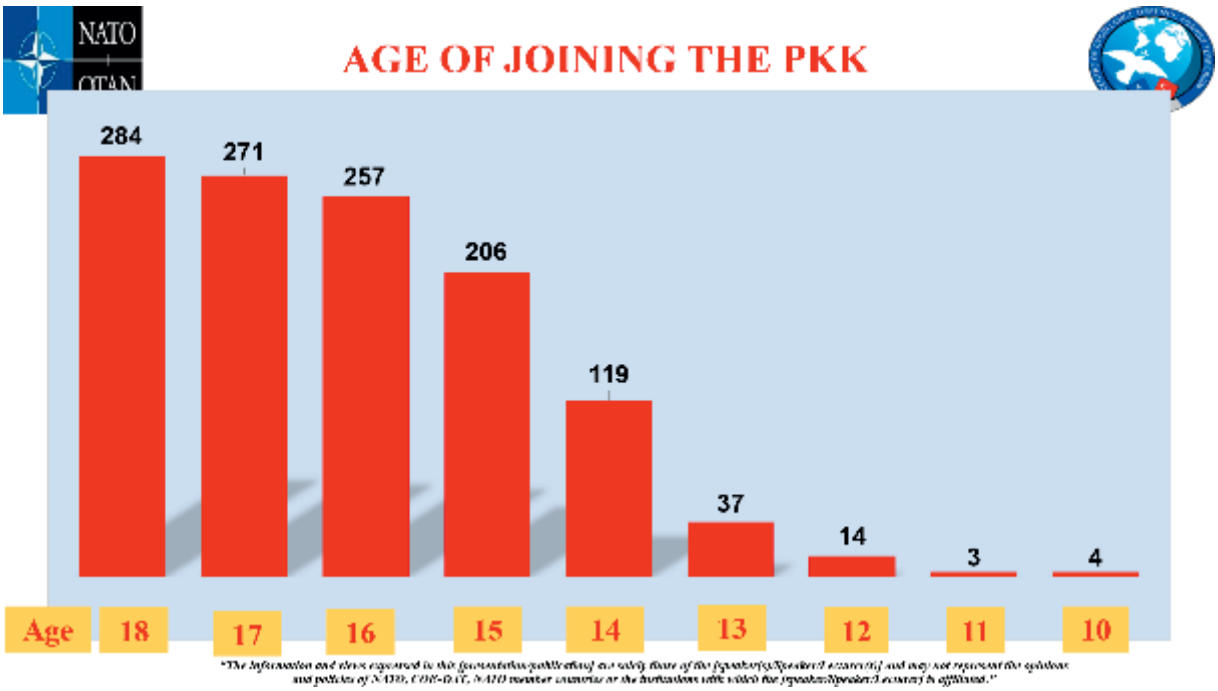
ignoring their childhood and using them as resources. Children who are recruited as combatants experience psychological trauma. Girls are particularly vulnerable to psychological violence, labelled as due to sexual activity involvement. This situation worsens the victimization of children. The PKK is infamous for sexual abuse against children, with girls facing greater threats.

Data analysis was conducted in five main stages. Within the scope of the research project, statements provided to security forces or judicial authorities by children under the age of 18 who joined the PKK terrorist organization and subsequently escaped on their own, who were either captured by security forces or surrendered, were analysed. A total of 1,197 statements were analysed individually, thematic coding was applied, and the data was analysed. Subsequently, a descriptive analysis of the data was presented, and compliance analysis was conducted using SPSS.

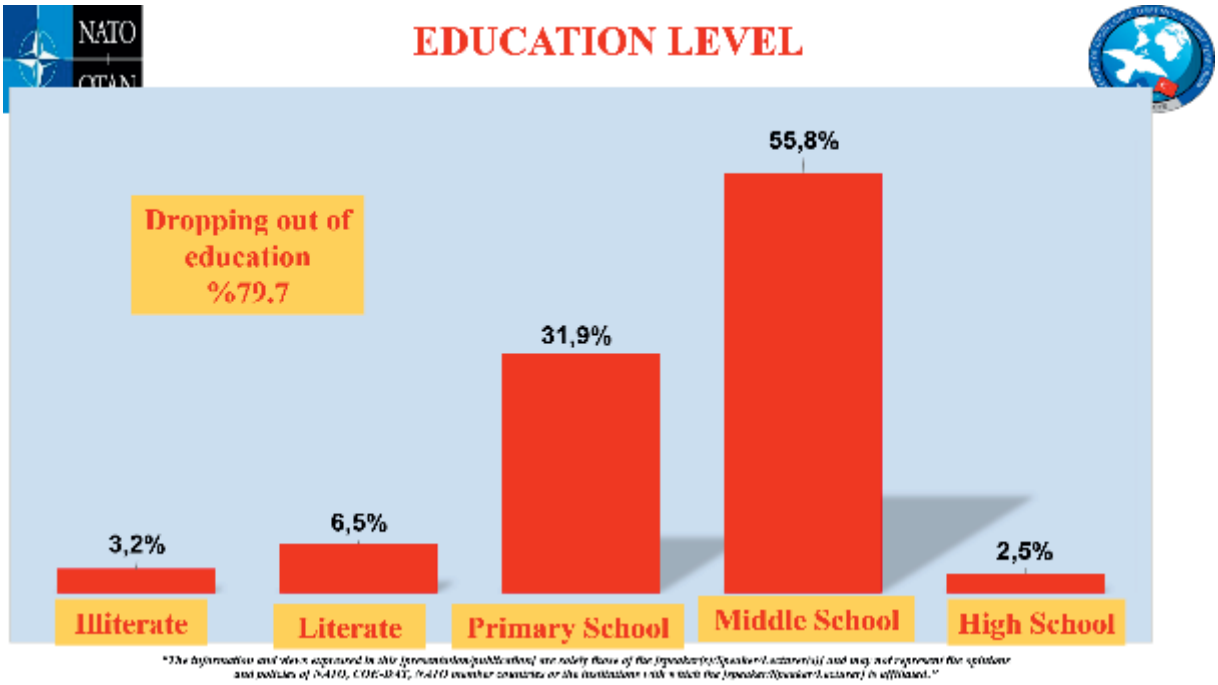
The research results were evaluated within the scope of five basic variables. These are as follows:

1. Descriptive Statistics of Children Dragged into Terrorism,
2. Findings on the First Point of Contact with the PKK,
3. Findings on the Reasons for Joining the PKK,
4. Findings on the Training Received in the PKK,
5. Findings on the Reasons for Leaving the PKK.

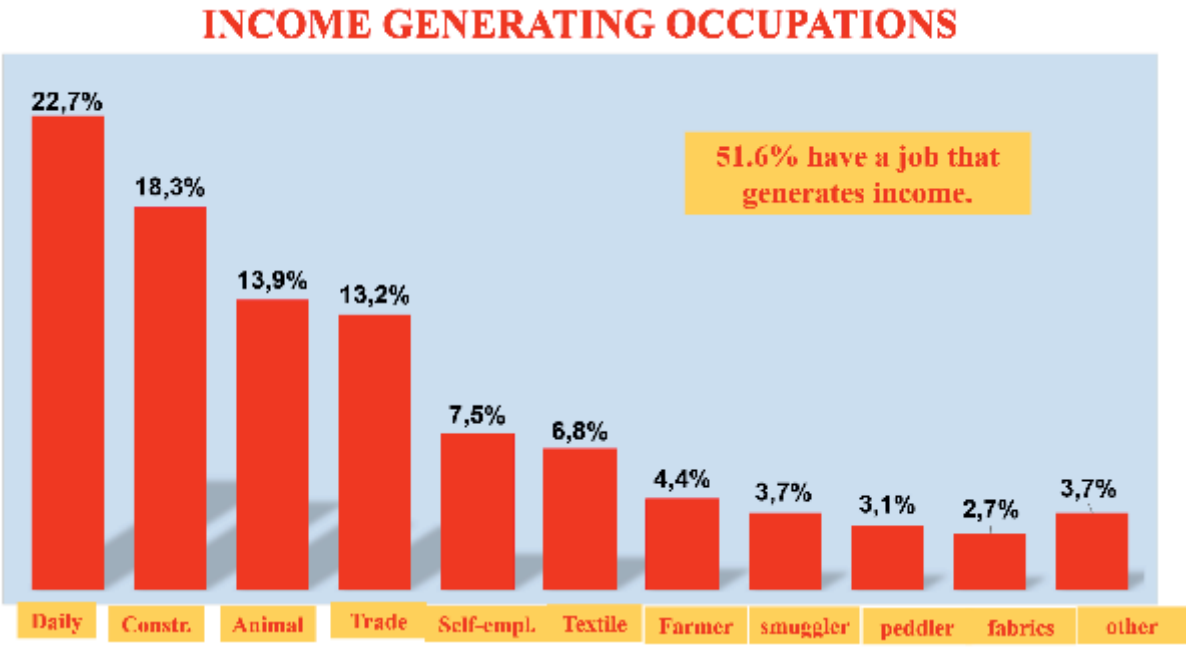
The descriptive statistics of the findings are in terms of the proportion of both sexes, 75.9% of the children were boys and 24.1% were girls.



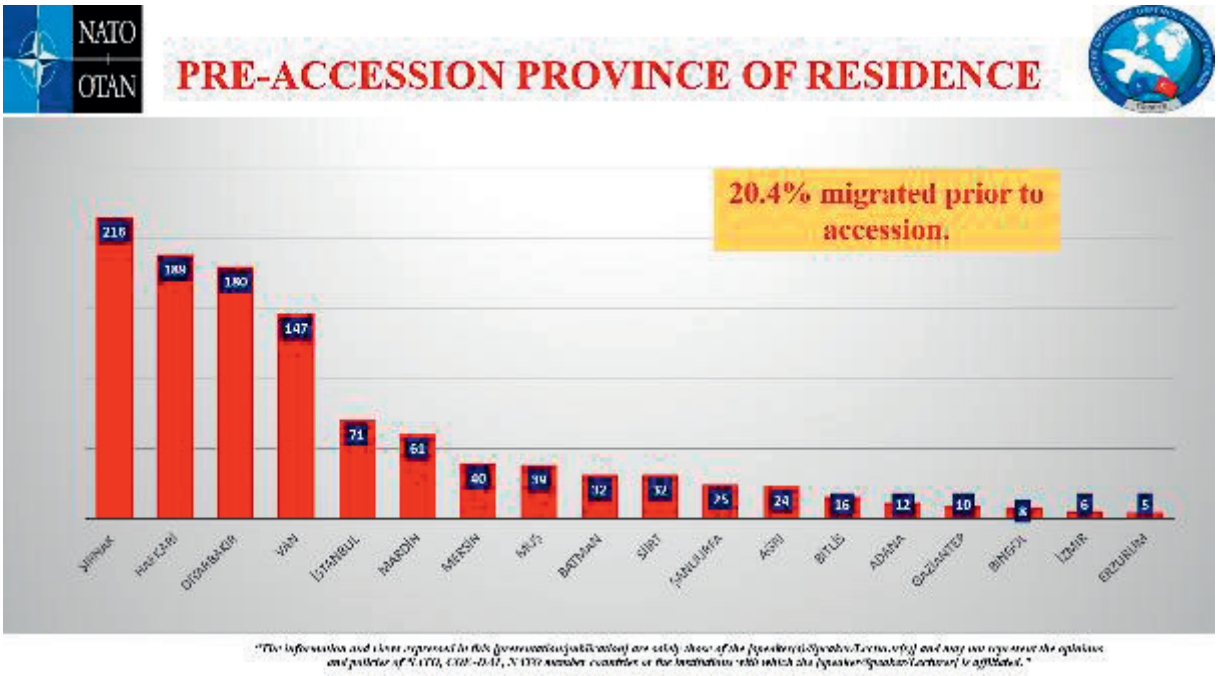
When the age distribution of the children was analysed, it was found that a qualified portion of the children were between the ages of 15-18 and a significant portion of them were in the 17-18 age group.



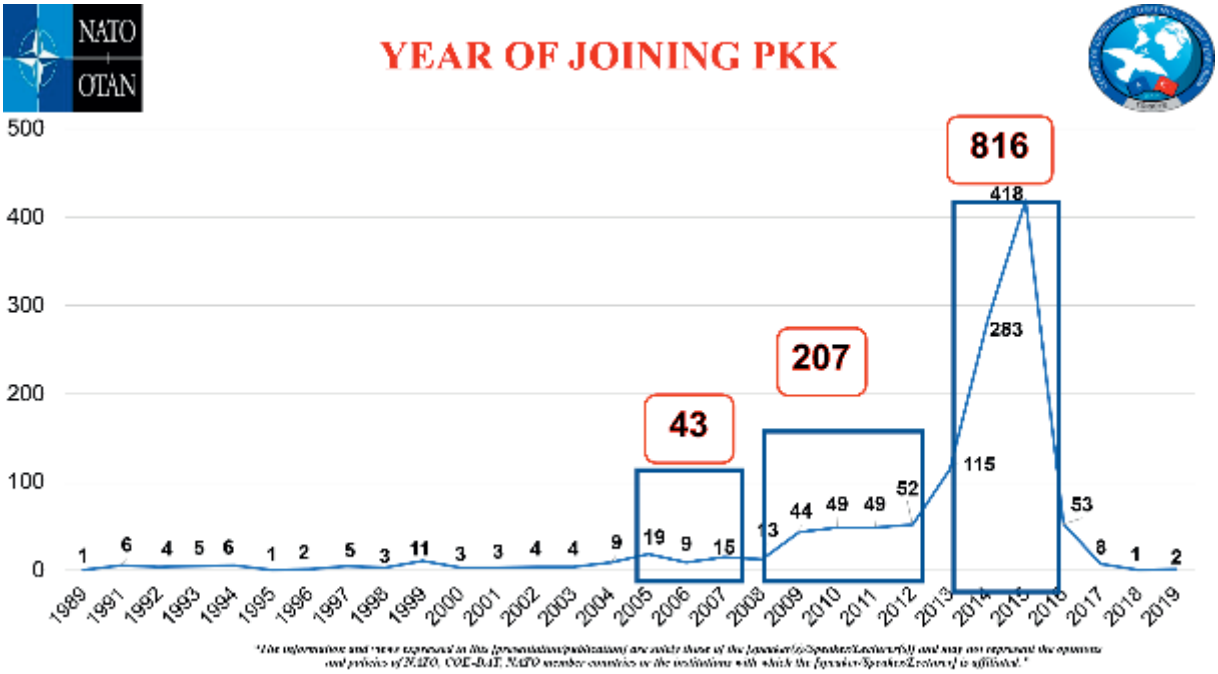
The education level of interviewees shows that more than half of the children graduated from middle school and nearly 80% of them had dropped out of education.



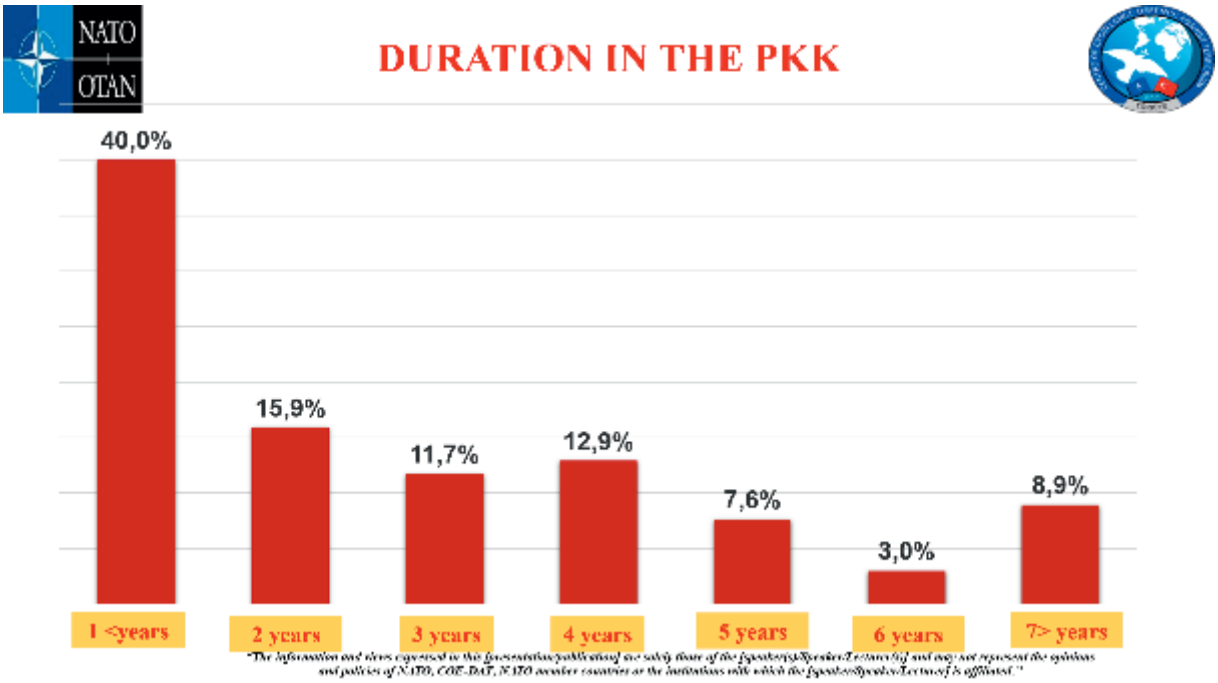
The data on the income-generating occupations depicts that the interviewees had jobs that brought daily earnings, and their earnings were at an average level.



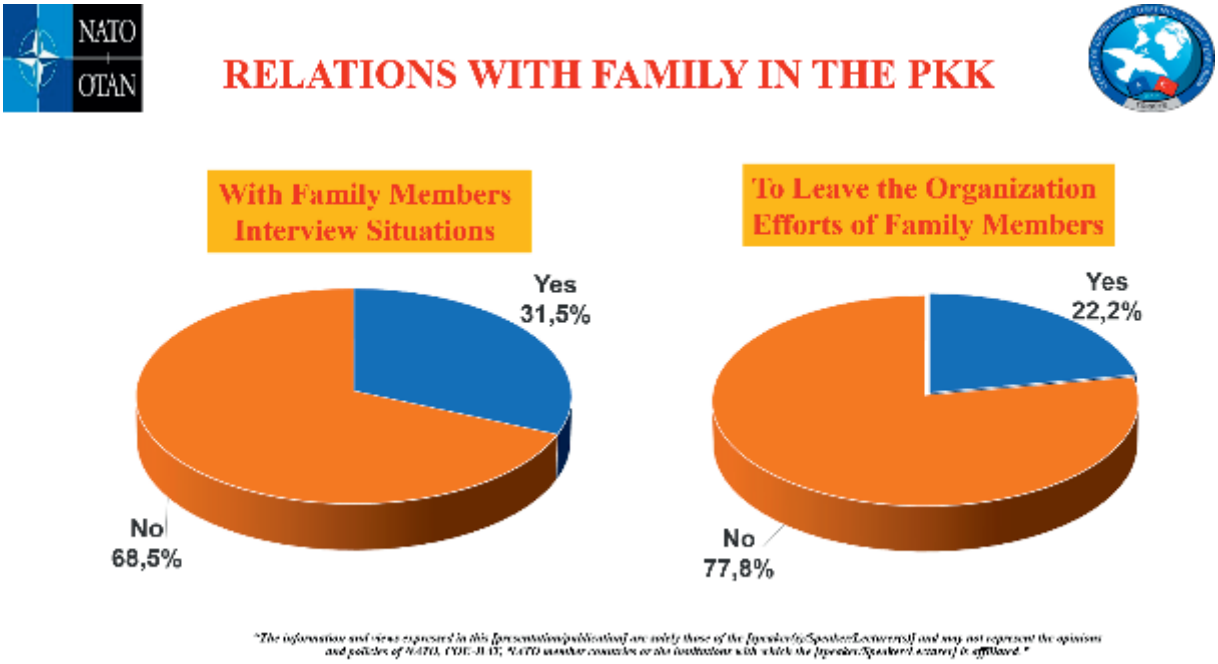
The analysis of the children's places of residence prior to joining the PKK terrorist organization revealed that many of them are originally from cities in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia.



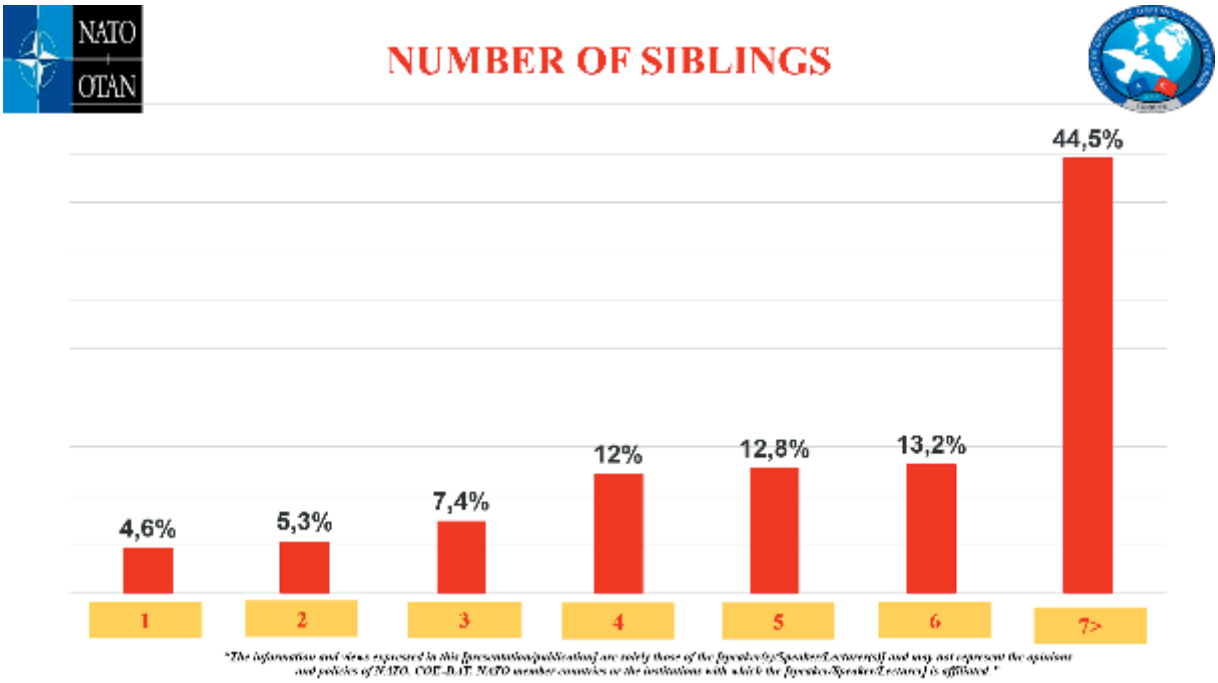
Participation peaked between 2013 and 2016, while the period from 2008 to 2012 also saw a notably high rate of involvement.



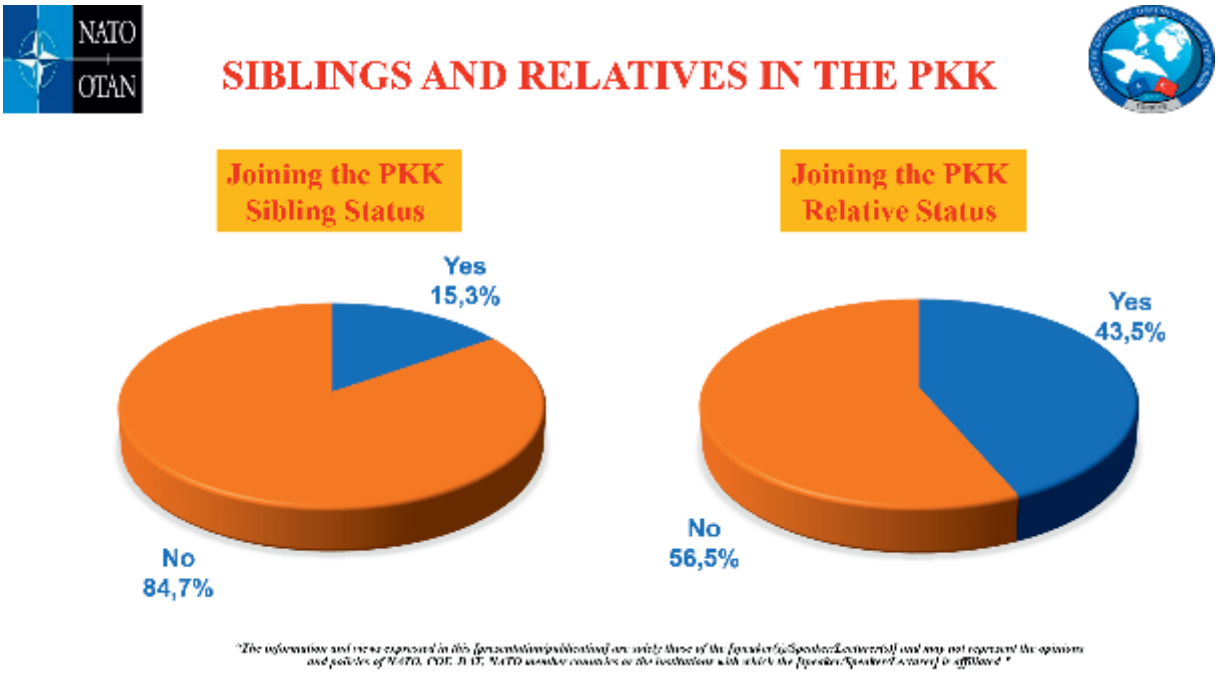
The evaluation of the time individuals spent in the PKK terrorist organization reveals that a significant number remained in the group for less than a year and left it for various reasons.



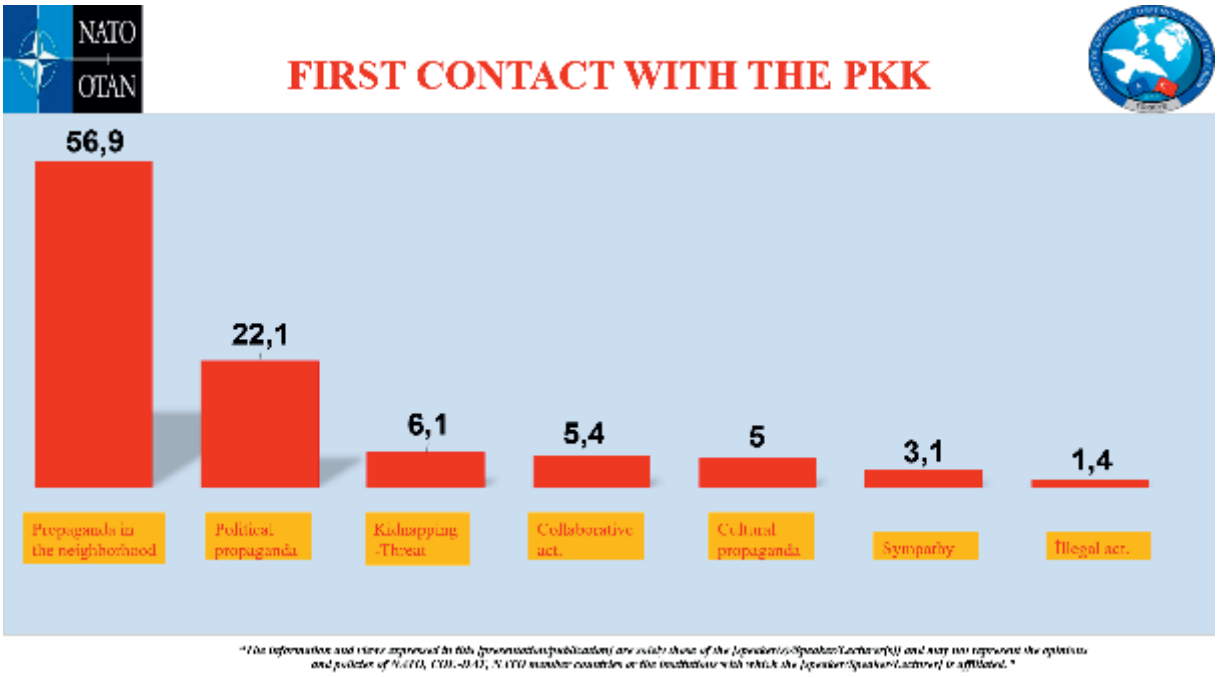
It was determined that one-third of the children were in contact with their families during the time they were in the terrorist organization and only 20% of the families made efforts to rescue their children from the terrorist organization.



Our findings indicate that a significant number of the children had between five and seven siblings.

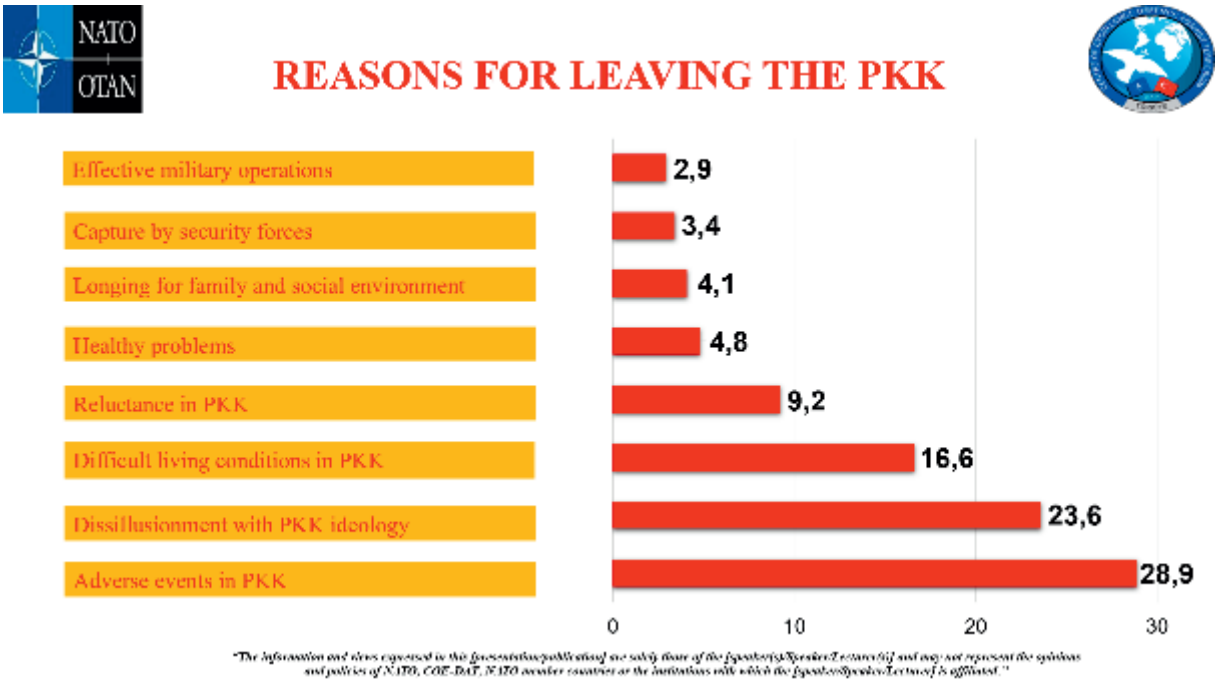


According to the data obtained, 15% of the children stated that their siblings had previously joined the PKK terrorist organization, while 43% reported that at least one of their relatives had done so. This finding is notably significant.



A significant number of children stated that they joined the terrorist organization due to the influence of their close relatives and the political party affiliated with the terrorist organization.

Based on the findings, a significant portion of the children joined the PKK terrorist organization due to their close proximity to the group and the influence of its propaganda.



When the reasons for leaving the PKK terrorist organization were analysed, it was determined that a significant portion of the children left the PKK terrorist organization because of the adverse events they experienced, difficult living conditions, and the ideology of the terrorist organization was not compatible with them.

Compliance Analysis (Cross Table)

			Reason for Leaving								
			Longing for family and environment	Affected by negative events in the PKK	Disillusionment with PKK ideology	Difficult living conditions in the PKK	Arrested by security forces	Reluctance in PKK	Effective military operations	Healthy problems	Total
Reason for Participation	Influenced by the involvement of family, relatives and friends	Number	0	17	14	8	2	1	0	0	42
		%	0	4,9	4,9	4,1	4,9	0,9	0	0	3,8
	Propaganda of family and friends	Number	6	43	30	23	8	8	6	6	128
		%	12,2	12,4	10,6	11,7	19,5	5,6	17,1	10,3	11,4
	Willingness to get away from the family due to family problems	Number	7	52	46	30	2	4	2	8	151
		%	14,3	15	16,3	15,2	4,9	3,6	5,7	13,8	13,5
	Proximity to PKK	Number	14	109	84	70	18	8	11	21	333
		%	28,6	31,5	29,7	35,6	43,9	5,6	31,4	36,2	29,8
	PKK's propaganda	Number	10	67	66	43	5	12	11	7	210
		%	20,4	19,4	19,4	21,8	12,2	10,9	31,4	12,1	18,8
	Voluntary participation due to psychological condition	Number	3	13	1	3	2	2	1	5	30
		%	6,1	3,8	0,4	1,5	4,9	1,8	2,9	8,6	2,7
	Willingness to fight against Daesh	Number	5	29	45	14	0	3	3	4	101
		%	10,2	8,4	15,2	7,1	0	2,7	8,6	6,9	9
	Participation due to kidnapping and threats	Number	4	16	10	6	4	76	1	7	124
		%	8,2	4,6	3,5	3	9,8	69,1	2,9	12,1	11,1
Total		Number	49	346	283	197	41	110	35	58	1.119
		%	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

When the reasons for joining the PKK terrorist organization and the reasons for leaving the PKK terrorist organization were analysed according to the compliance analysis, a significant relationship was found between the proximity to the PKK terrorist organization and the negative events experienced in the terrorist organization.

When the relationship between reason for joining the PKK and type of first contact is analysed, children who are influenced by the propaganda of political party organizations and close social circles develop an affinity towards the PKK. The desire to get away from the family due to domestic problems and the desire to fight against DAESH also support the motivation to join PKK. It is observed that propaganda by close relatives and political party organizations is more effective on those who are looking for an escape route due to family problems, who have psychological problems and who are disturbed by the Syrian civil war. While the importance and determinism of formal and informal social control on children is revealed, it is understood that political parties, which claim to defend the right to democratic representation, function as a propaganda tool of PKK and drag children into terrorism.

Another variable is the relationship between the reason for joining PKK and length of time spent in the PKK. 473 children (39.9%) surrendered to the security forces after being in PKK for 1 year or less, 189 children (16%) surrendered after being in PKK for 2 years. The majority of them started to feel close to PKK by being exposed to the propaganda of the family, friends, social environment and PKK, and for this reason, although they joined to PKK, they chose to escape from PKK in a short time. It is understood that PKK, which can reach children directly or indirectly and make propaganda, cannot keep the children, and that children who face the realities of PKK return when they find the opportunity. It is observed that 67 (48.9%) of the 137 children recruited through abduction or threats left PKK within 1 or 2 years; PKK has difficulty in integrating the abducted children into terrorism.

In terms of the relationship between reason for joining PKK and year of joining, in the 2011-2015 period, participation rates came to the forefront due to proximity to PKK and propaganda. It is understood that PKK took advantage of the conflict-free environment during the so-called ceasefire periods and the “solution process” to recruit personnel and increase its propaganda activities.

Based on the results, the children dragged into terrorism by the PKK;

have problems within the family,

have economic difficulties,

have problems in social integration,

are in search of a way out, a new identity or a new life,

have not completed their education and training processes.

It is understood that these groups, where formal and informal social control is weak, are vulnerable to propaganda of PKK, political parties, or siblings, friends and relatives who have already joined PKK. In this framework, it is evaluated that the push and pull factors create a sense of curiosity and affinity towards PKK in children, and with this motivation, children are dragged into terrorism and join PKK under the influence of internal factors such as the desire to escape from the family and external factors such as threat and fear of social environment.

Despite the push and pull factors that are effective on most of those who join PKK, children who are confronted with the reality of the PKK soon develop a desire to escape or leave PKK, and those who find the opportunity to do so surrender to the security forces when the conditions are right. The fact that those who left PKK maintained contact with their families while they were in PKK and that some of them were encouraged by their families to leave PKK points to the importance of the family's influence in "persuasion processes".

One of the important findings of the research is that PKK has been conducting intensive propaganda activities for children under the name of cultural activities through political parties with which it is affiliated with the PKK's elements and supporters. It is an abuse of democratic rights for political parties or non-governmental organizations, which are among the most important actors in democratic life, to have relations with the PKK and to play a role in dragging children into terrorism.

Closing Remarks

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Participants,

As we come to the end of this important workshop, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to all of you for your valuable contributions and active engagement throughout our sessions.

The discussions we have had over the past two days have once again highlighted the importance of addressing today's security challenges with inclusive and collaborative approaches. Your insights and experiences have greatly enriched our collective understanding and reaffirmed the relevance of our shared efforts.

I hope the connections established and the perspectives shared here will serve as a foundation for continued collaboration well beyond this event.

I would like to take a moment to sincerely thank those who played a key role in the preparation and realization of this workshop.

My heartfelt thanks go to, our Workshop Director, whose guidance and support have been greatly appreciated throughout this process, Ms. Özge ERKAN. I am also thankful to, Workshop Co-director, for her valuable efforts and dedication that helped ensure the smooth running of our program, Ms. Sultan ERDOĞAN YILDIZ. A warm thanks as well to, our Academic Advisor, for her thoughtful contributions and for helping us maintain a strong academic focus in our discussions, Dr. Merve ÖNENLİ GÜVEN. Additionally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Ms. Selvi KAHRAMAN, our CIS Specialist for her continuous support and contributions, which have been essential to the success of this initiative.

I would also like to express my appreciation to all of our speakers, moderators, and participants—from academic, institutional, and military backgrounds—for the insights and experiences they shared with us.

Thank you once again for your participation and commitment. We look forward to welcoming you to future COE-DAT activities.

Best wishes.

Halil Sıddık AYHAN
Colonel (TUR A)
Director, COE-DAT

KEY FINDINGS

Gender Issue in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism

- Gender is a crucial topic in terrorism and counterterrorism because gender roles are exploited by the terrorist organizations in their recruitment strategies and in the development of their terrorist activities.

- Instability, crisis, conflict, and post-conflict situations, that define the current broader security environment, have distinct and disproportionate impact on women and girls.

- There is a trend of hybridization. All politically oriented terrorist groups are now getting involved in criminal activities. They are doing smuggling, they are doing illegal economies in, so they become hybrid-armed groups.

- There is also another trend, which is that the power of these criminal groups results in the ability to influence politics.

- Terrorist organizations understand the importance of gender and gender stereotypes well. They often exploit gendered narratives to recruit children and women by appealing to specific roles and expectations within their societies.

- Weaponized gendered narratives refer to the use of gender-related stories or ideas in a way that aims to manipulate, control, or harm others. This can involve promoting stereotypes or using gender-specific language or roles to create division or reinforce power dynamics. Often, it is about using these narratives in a way that supports a particular agenda or marginalizes certain groups.

- Weaponized gendered narratives are an emerging domain of asymmetric warfare. It builds on previous practices, including disinformation, information warfare, psychological operations (PSYOPS), fake news, social media, propaganda, and other practices and tools, and it draws on advances in fields such as technological advances in domains such as social media and artificial intelligence (AI).

- Gendered narratives by terrorist and violent extremist groups are also used to acquire legitimacy.

- Gendered narratives are not, however, only targeted at women; men and boys are also the mark of narratives centred on traditionally masculine roles of fighting for and taking care of their communities. Groups like DAESH used notions of shame and narratives of emasculation to incentivize men and boys to join the cause; they were taunted by narratives that challenged their sense of self or abilities to meet the cultural expectations of men in certain contexts.

- PVE takes many different areas into consideration to actually build a more resilient society towards terrorism. Prevention involves proactively addressing the social, economic, and political factors that contribute to the radicalization of individuals.

- Counter-terrorism strategies should be developed according to the evolving threat landscape with a comprehensive approach through integrating gender perspectives in counter terrorism efforts.

Women's Involvement in Terrorist Organizations

- In the 21st century women's role in terrorism is expanded.

- The diversity and complexity of roles that women may play in terrorist groups - whether as supporters, recruiters, informants, strategists, fund raisers or fighters, and whether voluntarily, by deceit or by force - remains an issue of concern.

- Beyond recruiting and fighting, women play a crucial role in these organizations as narrators of ideology. In other words, they are also propagandists and spokespersons.

- There is an obvious instrumentalization of women in terrorist organizations, for recruitment or for tactical gains, as women are used as suicide bombers since they are less suspicious. Hence, the instrumentalization of women for gaining sympathy and legitimacy becomes a core issue.

- Some groups emphasize the role of women as mothers and wives of fighters, portraying them as essential to the group's survival and continuity. Women may also be used in support roles, such as logistics, recruitment, or fundraising, which are often seen as less visible but crucial to the group's operations. Gendered narratives can be used to recruit and radicalize individuals, particularly women, by framing their participation in the group to fulfil their perceived gender roles or contribute to the cause.

- The Western Balkans emerged as a significant recruitment ground for DAESH, largely due to socio-economic instability, weak state institutions, and a widespread erosion of trust in public systems.

- Mostly in Albania, the dominant idea is that women have been involved in violent extremism due to the influence of males. However, it is not always a result of obedience, but it is also a matter of personal justification to take action.

- During the participation process, motives in terms of identity struggles, trauma, and gendered expectations also contribute to radicalization processes.

- Extremist propaganda, particularly that of DAESH, effectively exploited this cultural backdrop by offering women a structured sense of purpose and belonging that echoed—but also intensified—the traditional roles they had long inhabited. This ideological congruence made the group's radical message appear less foreign or

extreme, and instead as a continuation of familiar societal expectations framed in a new context.

- Having prior experiences of trauma, including parent loss, emotional neglect, personal crisis, or domestic abuse creates vulnerabilities, which result in creating a clear identity during adulthood. These early experiences increase the possibility for these women to be more vulnerable and open to extremist manipulation. Women raised under these conditions become increasingly susceptible to extremist propaganda, often finding themselves powerless in the face of narratives that exploit their existing vulnerabilities and unmet needs. Living under the fear and chaos, urges these women to seek only security and stability.

- The rise of female involvement in religiously motivated terrorism is rooted in a complex constellation of structural, psychological, and ideological factors. Patriarchal social systems and the misinterpretation of religious teachings contribute to the marginalization of women, particularly in contexts marked by economic hardship and psychological vulnerability.

- While some women are coerced or manipulated into joining extremist groups, others are driven by a desire for purpose, dignity, and clearly defined roles within a community. These motivations often intersect with personal crises and emotional needs, forming multifaceted pathways to radicalization. The influence of deeply embedded social schemas and persuasive ideological narratives further facilitates this process by reframing traditional gender roles within a religiously legitimized context.

- The absence of healthy outlets for processing pain and adversity can exacerbate feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and vulnerability, thereby creating a psychological landscape in which extremist narratives can take root more easily.

- Women's decisions to join DAESH can be understood through the lens of both push and pull factors. On the one hand, poverty, limited opportunities, patriarchal control, and a sense of powerlessness or insignificance pushed many toward radical alternatives. On the other hand, the promise of a better life under DAESH, religious fulfilment, and a longing for structured family and spiritual belonging served as powerful pull factors. While some women agreed to travel primarily to accompany their husbands or reunite with children, others actively supported the ideological cause, driven by a belief in the utopian vision of the caliphate.

- Recruitment of Central Asian women into the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq often occurred through complex, multifaceted channels, sometimes involving coercive mechanisms. Targeting methods were effectively applied by the terrorists and violent extremists. These groups are friendship and kinship networks. Furthermore, human trafficking was also used as a way to bring people to the conflict zones, including women.

- Another finding is related to the parents, especially mothers, who were desperate and wanted to arrive in Syria to bring their children, sons and daughters, back to their home countries; but they were trapped themselves once they met their children, they could not get them. Out of the conflict zone, therefore, there is an indirect way of making people join terrorist groups on the grounds. Kinship and friendship networks are commonly used ways of recruiting people.

- The organizational strategies of DAESH and similar groups leaned heavily on exploiting familial or emotional bonds. They adopted the various means approach to recruitment as systematically exploiting traditional family structures and societal expectations placed on women to align with their conflicting goals.

- Basically, emotional manipulation and promises of a better future, combined with limited education and lack of access to reliable information, made many women particularly vulnerable to such tactics. Moreover, deception played a significant role in forced recruitment.

- Religion was also instrumentalized to convince people to join various violent groups on the ground, especially in the context of Central Asia, as the countries they were part of the Soviet Union for a long time, religion was not welcomed. After gaining independence, the countries were in a period where young people were trying to get back to their roots. But because of the lack of religious education, they could also be attracted to violent extremists and radicals.

- Recruitment strategies can be categorized under two models: the agency model and the dependency model. Agency basically explains the cases of women who were drawn into territorialization for different reasons, be it ideological, romantic, or many others; however, that was based on their own decisions, and they also had agency to serve as recruiters themselves, sometimes facilitating recruitment of both men and women into the conflict zones.

- In the dependency model, the recruitment or mobilization was based mostly on the dependency or the logic of dependencies, since the majority of them followed their husbands, they were either forced to go there by their husbands, expected to go, or they follow their husbands, and that's up to 70 and 80% of all the cases. Interestingly, the logic of dependency can also be observed further in the repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of women, both in theoretical and practical terms.

- The inclusion of women is a strategic and insincere move, and this is pink-washing by the terrorist organizations. Using women's inclusion is similar to how greenwashing is used by companies to appear eco-friendly while polluting behind the scenes.

- Terrorism is based on the psychological processes of the individual and is influenced by emotional, existential, or identity-based concerns. Women, especially, are more likely to be driven by personal motivation. Factors such as trauma, grief, loss, and emotional vulnerability contribute to the increase in radicalization. The impact of past

emotional experiences—particularly childhood trauma, neglect, and abuse—plays a critical role in shaping susceptibility to radicalization. When such experiences are coupled with a lack of coping mechanisms, such as social support or emotional resilience, the risk becomes even more pronounced.

Children's Involvement and the Status of Children in Terrorist Organizations

- One of the most important features of terrorist organizations that makes their physical existence possible is human resources. When the human profile structure of terrorist organizations is examined, it is observed that especially young individuals are preferred in recruitment.

- One of the main reasons for this is that young people have more areas of exploitation, they are more prone to manipulation and are easier to control within terrorist organizations.

- Terrorist organizations make use of children in many different roles within their organizational structures, based on the vulnerability of children and the fact that children's behaviours can be more easily indoctrinated than adults.

- Migration movements caused by situations such as civil wars and children who lose their parents in these processes become targets for terrorist organizations. For children in insecure environments, an organizational image is created in the minds of children to perceive the internal order of armed structures as safe spaces where they can be protected.

- The image of the organization, which is established through authoritarian and oppressive methods, enables the child to adopt the rule-driven behaviours of the organization. Children become the subjects of an environment where cultural norms and beliefs are shaped through the element of violence.

- The use of the "child soldier" term creates a high risk and possibility of the legitimization of children abuse by accepting the involvement of children in terrorist organizations as voluntary.

- Children who are made to take part in any conflict environment are exposed to adult abuse and crimes are committed against children who need to be protected and whose physical and emotional characteristics are at the forefront on the basis of being weak and dependent.

- The concept of "child soldier" is a discursive tool used by terrorist organizations to gain legitimacy. In this context, it reveals a problematic conceptualization. This is because the concept of "child" refers to an immature, simple-minded individual in the transition period from infancy to youth, who has not fully completed his/her physical, mental and emotional development, while the concept of «soldier» refers to a person who has a certain level of skill to fight.

- A child who is in between infancy and adolescence does not complete his/her psychological, physical, emotional and mental development does not have the capacity to use and develop systematic violence. Therefore, children are terrorized by naming them “child soldiers”.

- In the process of ensuring the forced involvement of children in terrorist organizations children are mentally, emotionally and physically abused.

- The “child soldier” definition causes the child to normalize his/her presence in the organization and hinders the visibility of the victimization of the child and the crime committed by the terrorist organization. On this basis, such kinds of definitions used against children also lead to the construction of a cultural language of violence.

- The presence of a child in a terrorist organization and the attempt to make sense of it through concepts such as “child soldier” causes the violation of the most fundamental rights of the child to be ignored. By attributing the elements of voluntariness and will to the situation in which the child is involved, the victimized child is criminalized.

- The concept of “children dragged into terrorism” can be used to avoid legal connotations and consider children’s mental development and vulnerability.

- However, it is important to consider the agency of young people, however limited that agency might be. Young people have agency, and they are deeply politicized and dehumanized.

- Recruitment of children in terrorist organizations is strategic, diverse, and contingent; it depends on the local context.

- *Strategic Recruitment* is planned recruitment, carried out when armed groups have established territorial and social control. It aims to sustain and expand the group over the long term through ideological indoctrination, socialization activities, family ties and activists, enlistment, reinforcing governance and legitimacy.

- *Predatory or Expedient Recruitment* is urgent, opportunistic recruitment used during periods of rivalry, territorial contestation, or military pressure. It focuses on rapidly replenishing fighting capacity through coercion, deception, and manipulation, reflecting the immediate survival needs of the armed group.

- *Tactical/Short-Term Task-specific Recruitment* is linked to operational or logistical objectives.

The Role of Technology in Recruitment and Radicalization Processes

- The spread of technological innovations and social media, and the access to these give individuals to create and amplify content, will likely continue to facilitate this trend.

- Women are also great recruiters for DAESH on social media and calling for their "sisters" to meet their "roles" to populate the state as baby factories.

- In addition, online contact was quite effective while not saying online radicalization because, compared to, for example, Western Europe, the online space was used more for reaching out to people, being in touch, and providing guidance on how to travel to Syria and Iraq. However, the issue of online radicalization, is peripheral in the case of the Central Asian countries.

- Social media has become a convenient and effective way to maintain contact and continue influencing individuals

- There is a three-level approach to digital radicalization and there are some mechanisms. One is low threshold engagement, which is the kind of first contact, young people being contacted by extremists or terrorists via the use of messaging, WhatsApp, Facebook, but it is an initial contact to strike up a bond. The point is to build some kind of emotional connection that can then be exploited and manipulated further.

- The next mechanism is grooming and normalization, which involves more indoctrination—i.e., sharing of literature, sharing of ideology, and building upon that emotional bond that was created in the first place, and then encrypted radicalization, which is private channels that are much harder to trace for the authorities, and maybe even task-related. Dissident factions of the FARC or the ELN give specific tasks to young people through telegram and other social media services as a kind of test. Then they will even wire them money. This is something that is a huge issue at the moment in Colombia.

- Technology plays a dual role: while it promotes globalization in a positive sense, it also enables terrorist groups to globalize their operations by facilitating easier access to human resources. A person in Iraq or Syria can now easily reach someone in Canada, which contributes to the globalization of terrorist networks. So, digital tools and social media are certainly important and should not be underestimated. However, when it comes to actual recruitment, traditional methods—such as face-to-face interactions and personal networks—still remain more prominent and effective.

Re-Integration Efforts and Challenges

- Community-based integration efforts, especially those targeting women, are particularly valuable in case of reintegration and rehabilitation (R&R) programs. Community-based reintegration should be seen as a continuation of the rehabilitation process. Without it, it becomes difficult to ensure long-term impact—both on reintegrating families and on former FTFs. By including women in this process, their involvement also allows to better prepare communities for reintegration. Civil society should play a key role in this, supporting women-led efforts to strengthen social cohesion more broadly.

- Community-based reintegration efforts, when built upon governmental actions, have proven to be highly effective—not only in supporting returnees but also in reducing the risk of re-radicalization. If the communities are prepared properly and the collaboration with civil society is sustained, then they can monitor and support reintegration over the long term. This way, even five years later, if a person shows signs of re-radicalization, the community/women will be equipped to respond quickly and effectively.

- Vocational training, in particular, plays an important role. Most countries offer such programs to returnee women. There are typically two groups: one group readily embraces the programs, opening small businesses with the support of different organizations, or working in professions like hairdressing. But there is also a second group—women who are reluctant to work and prefer to maintain the role of housewife.

- Addressing the needs of this second group is more complex. It requires long-term engagement, counter-narratives, and sustained efforts to offer alternatives. There is a need to convince them by providing with meaningful options, which is another major challenge that must be acknowledged.

- Following the defeat of DAESH and other groups, the repatriation of women was particularly problematic in the Central Asian case, not because of its scale, but also because of the lack of training.

- While the basic support was provided for the returnees, there are still challenges remaining in these fields. Socioeconomic difficulties remain a major hurdle. In particular, some women are going to struggle to find jobs and secure housing. Bureaucratic challenges, such as obtaining legal documentation like death certificates for deceased husbands, are problematic, and this also creates another problem for children because they cannot get extra social benefits since they do not have fathers, and it is very difficult to prove by law.

- Returned women were not evaluated for potential treatment with medication for conditions such as depression, anxiety, or PTSD, and nearly none underwent a psychotherapy process.

- Stigmatization is also another challenge. Women, especially the majority of them, are coming or leaving the rural areas. They face suspicion. Also, there occurs social exclusion in their communities because some communities are scared that they would be radicalized by these “criminal women and children”.

- One of the key challenges facing involves children under the age of 10. Engaging with them and trying to communicate is particularly difficult. It is especially challenging to work with children over 10 who have witnessed atrocities first hand—many of them saw their parents killed. These experiences leave deep trauma, and many of the children simply do not speak or express their feelings.

- Even if the inclusion of women in intervention programs is always a beneficial aspect, women continue to face numerous persistent and structural challenges. These are as follows:
    1. Gender based discrimination and social norms,
    2. Lack of gender mainstreaming,
    3. Lack of representation in decision-making,
    4. Self-censorship and limited confidence in public spaces,
    5. Limited access to education,
    6. Lack of institutional support for women's initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is a need for more research on how violent extremists and terrorist groups across the ideological spectrum exploit gender dynamics in their recruitment strategies because this is still an area that needs further attention in understanding the push and pull factors in the participation process of terrorist organizations.

- It is important to recognize the diverse roles of children in armed conflicts, particularly when dealing with terrorism.

- Unaddressed trauma—particularly when experienced early in life—can have profound psychological consequences, including diminished self-worth, lack of autonomy, and persistent feelings of guilt and shame. For women, these emotional burdens may lead to heightened vulnerability to radical ideologies. It is therefore essential to closely examine individual personal histories and emotional experiences when seeking to understand the motivations behind female radicalization. Without such an in-depth, empathetic approach, the underlying drivers of their engagement with extremist groups risk being overlooked.

- Reintegration efforts, require a long-term commitment to psychological and social transformation. From a policy perspective, countering violent extremism must extend beyond traditional security approaches to address the deeper structural and emotional roots of radicalization.

- Rehabilitation and reintegration programs following the repatriation are mostly state-led, but also there is a need for the support of international organizations and civil society institutions.

- The discussion on the concept of "child soldier" requires further attention to draw some definitional boundaries between the two terms: *a child* and *a soldier*. Since, a child is an immature person who has not completed his/her physical, mental, and emotional development, whereas a soldier is a person who has a specialization that requires professionalism in line with specific skills.

- The recruitment of children by terrorist organizations is a crime. Hence, it is important to concretize how children are victimized and become victims of terrorist organizations.

- The presence of children in terrorist organizations should be studied in the context of child abuse.

- The recruitment strategies of the armed groups depend on ideological, emotional, cultural, and structural factors. Therefore, effective prevention requires addressing root causes in addition to military interventions.

- Addressing weaponized gendered narratives in war, conflict and terrorist organizations requires a multi-faceted approach:
  1. Increasing the number of women in the security sector and "counter-speech" or "counter-narrative" campaigns to address the gendered narratives and messaging from terrorists and violent extremists will remain critical.
  2. Education and Awareness: Promote education that challenges stereotypes and fosters critical thinking about gender roles. Encourage discussions that question and deconstruct harmful narratives.
  3. Inclusive Dialogue: Encourage inclusive dialogue that involves diverse perspectives, including those of women and marginalized groups, to ensure that all voices are heard and respected.
  4. Media Literacy: Promote media literacy to help people critically evaluate and recognize biased or harmful narratives in media and propaganda.
  5. Support for Affected Communities: Provide support to communities affected by conflict, ensuring that aid and interventions are gender-sensitive and address the specific needs of all individuals.
  6. Advocacy and Policy Change: Advocate for policies that promote gender equality and protect against the misuse of gendered narratives in conflict situations.

- When women are excluded from these spaces, it becomes harder for other women to step into the public sphere, express their opinions, and claim their rightful place in shaping strategies and solutions. Even when policies are designed to create space for women, they may hesitate to take it due to internalized self-censorship. Therefore, it is equally important to work with women to build their confidence and demonstrate that they have valuable contributions to make. Empowering them to believe in their own voice is a crucial part of ensuring their active and meaningful participation.

- For many women, experiences of trauma, grief, loss, and emotional vulnerability serve as catalysts for radicalization. These unresolved emotional wounds can create a psychological void, which extremist narratives strategically exploit by offering a sense of belonging, purpose, and emotional validation.

- The radicalization of women within religiously motivated terrorism can be better understood through a psycho-social lens that emphasizes the interplay between individual emotional experiences and broader social dynamics. Psychological theories suggest that terrorism is not solely a product of ideology or environment but is also rooted in deeply personal processes.

- In reintegration programs, the psychological readiness of returnees should be evaluated in the beginning. For instance, most of the returnee women have between three and five children, which makes it extremely challenging to maintain a balance

between personal, family, and program demands. By the time they are finally ready to begin processing their trauma—particularly complex trauma—the support programs have typically ended, as most are designed to last only around three years.

- Also, regional differences should be considered in re-integration programs. For example, in Central Asia, work with women differs—particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where there is more emphasis on the religious dimension. Although these aspects are interconnected, they are often approached separately, which presents an additional challenge. Some women previously held leadership roles in conflict zones, which makes it particularly difficult for local religious authorities, such as imams, to counter their influence. These women may be more charismatic or claim to have more experience than the imams they engage with, making it harder to challenge their views. Whether male or female, imams often struggle to convince these women, as they may lack the same level of persuasive authority. Therefore, it is essential to be well-informed in such contexts.

- Behavioural changes are relatively easier to observe and support, but the longer-term cognitive shifts require sustained, ongoing engagement and commitment.

- Multinational organizations should be further strengthened and continue to pursue gender-based policies. Internationally supported projects that empower women, such as job training programs, are particularly vital, especially in post-conflict regions where they can serve as effective and inspiring examples.

- Sustainability should be one of the main objectives in reintegration programs and the recovery and integration process must be long-term.

- Manipulation of information and disinformation are increasingly being exploited to support extremist ideologies. This is not just a spontaneous phenomenon—it is becoming systematic and programmatic. Addressing it requires a multi-layered approach, including legal frameworks, but also strong preventive measures led by both governments and civil society.

- There is also an important role for states to play through strategic communication. This is a field in its own right, focused on equipping communication professionals with the skills needed to deliver targeted and tailored messaging to specific communities—whether it be youth, women, or other vulnerable groups. The key is to learn how to speak their language, both literally and culturally, in order to resonate with their experiences and concerns. The goal is not just to counter harmful narratives, but to actively promote positive messaging and provide a truthful, grounded understanding of the realities. In doing so, strategic communication becomes a proactive tool in preventing radicalization and building resilience within communities.

Annex-A—Conference Program

COE-DAT WORKSHOP
Gender in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism:
Women, Children and Technology
29-30 April 2025
COE-DAT, Ankara, Türkiye

Workshop Director: Ms. Özge ERKAN (TUR)
Workshop Co-Director: Ms. Sultan ERDOĞAN YILDIZ (TUR)
Workshop Academic Advisor: Dr. Merve ÖNENLİ GÜVEN (TUR)

WORKSHOP PROGRAM

Tuesday, 29 April 2025 (1st Day)

09:00 – 09:30	**Gathering**
09:30 – 09:50	**COE-DAT Introduction Video & Admin Briefing –** Ms. Özge ERKAN, WS Director
09:50 – 10:15	**Welcome Address –** Col. Halil Sıddık AYHAN (TUR A), Director, COE-DAT
10:15 – 10:25	**Keynote Speech -** Ms. Burcu SAN**,** NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Operations
10:25 – 10:45	Break
10:45 – 13:00	**Session – 1 Women in Violent Extremist Movements: Roles and Psycho-Social Motivations - Moderator :** Dr. Richard WARNES
10:45 – 11:05	*Women's Roles as Recruiters, Perpetrators and Narrators of Ideologies in Terrorist Organizations – Assoc.Prof. Basar BAYSAL , Ankara Bilim University*
11:05 – 11:25	*Psycho-Social Motivations for Women to Take Part in Terrorist Organization – Ms. Aleksandra PUCI, Psychologist/Researcher*
11:25 – 11:40	Break
11:40 – 12:00	*Foreign Female Terrorist Fighters: Recruitment and Re-Integration Challenges – Dr. Almakan OROZOBEKOVA , OSCE Network for Women Professionals on P/CVERLT, Coordinator or/and OSCE Academy, Project and Training Specialist*
12:00 – 12:40	Open Discussion
12:40 – 13:00	'Hot wash-up' of Day 1 Discussions

13.00 – 15.00	Lunch
15:00 – 17:15	**Session – 2 The Conceptualization of «Child Soldiers»** **Moderator :** *Mr. Alec WARGO , United Nations Secretariat*
15:00 – 15:20	*"Child Soldiers" or Abused Children by Terrorist Organizations –* *Dr. Merve ÖNENLİ GÜVEN, National Intelligence Academy (Türkiye)*
15:20 – 15:40	*Children Recruitment Strategies of Terrorist Organizations –* *Dr. Mathew H. CHARLES, Universidad del Rosario*
15:40 – 15:55	Break
15:55 – 16:15	*Weaponised Gendered Narratives – Dr. Elisabeth SCHLEICHER, Kosovo Force (KFOR)*
16:15 – 16:55	Open Discussion
16:55 – 17:15	'Hot wash-up' of Day 2 Discussions
19:00 –21:00	Official Dinner for Speakers
Wednesday, 30 April 2025 (2nd Day)	
09:30 – 12:30	**Session – 3 The Role of Women in Counter-Terrorism: Facilitating Disengagement, Socio-Political Influences, and Technology for Gender Equality** **Moderator :** *Dr. Merve ÖNENLİ GÜVEN, National Intelligence Academy (Türkiye)*
09:30 – 09:50	*The Role of Women in Facilitating the Disengagement of Others from Terrorist Organizations – Ms. Anna Amelie MOREL, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*
09:50 – 10:10	*Analyzing Social, Political, Economic and Psychological Factors in the Establishment of Counter-Terrorism Measures – Dr. Murat KOÇANLI, Baskent University*
10:10– 10:25	Break
10:25 – 10:45	Open Discussion
10:45 – 11:25	'Hot wash-up' of Day 3 Discussions
11:25 – 11:45	Closing Remarks
11:45 –12:00	Certificate Ceremony

Annex-B—Biographies of the Speakers

Ms.Burcu SAN – Keynote Speaker

Deputy Assistant Secretary General (DASG) for Operations at NATO HQ, Brussels.

Burcu San is the Deputy Assistant Secretary General (DASG) for Operations. She provides political oversight of NATO's crisis management activities and operations, situational awareness, advance planning, crisis response, and outcome-oriented defence and related security cooperation programmes. She supervises the Director for Defence and Institutional Capacity Building and the Director for Operations.

Burcu started her career with an internship at the European Commission in 1994 and then served as the parliamentary assistant for a Member of the European Parliament. In 1996-1997, she worked in the Council of Europe. In 1998, she joined NATO's International Staff as political officer on the Balkans Task Force. In 2003, she was appointed as the Deputy Director of the Private Office of the Secretary General. In 2007 Burcu became the Head of the Defence Policy and Partnership Section in the Defence Policy and Planning Division. In 2012 she was appointed to the Operations Division to lead the Civil-Military Planning and Support Section. In 2015 she was promoted to become the Director for Preparedness in the same Division, and in 2019 she was appointed Director for Operations in NATO's Operations Division.

Burcu studied international relations in her home town Ankara. She completed post-graduate degrees in international security at the Bologna Center of the Johns Hopkins University and in European studies at the Catholic University of Leuven.

Dr. Merve ÖNENLİ GÜVEN – Academic Advisor

Academician at National Intelligence Academy, Türkiye.

Dr. Merve Önenli Güven is an Assistant Professor of Intelligence Studies at the National Intelligence Academy. She had 20 years work experience in the fields of public, academia, and non-governmental organizations. During her work experience she carried out projects in the development of counter-terrorism measures. She conducted various field studies about her expertise. Her research areas include political sociology and psychology in the practice of politics on social life through cultural dimensions with conflict analysis and management, radicalization, de-radicalization, terrorism, countering terrorism and intelligence studies. She is the author of Mirror Images of Terrorist Incidents in the News: News Coverage and Problem Solving Attitudes Towards Conflicts (Nobel, 2023). She has also book chapters recently published titled: Migration and Radicalization with Violence (Transnational Press London Publication, 2023), Anti-Immigration Rhetoric of Far-Right Movements in the Era of COVID-19 (Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), The Psychology of Forced Displacement and the Identity of Forcibly Displaced (Transnational Press London Publication, 2024), Spread of Ethno-Sectarian Conflict from Syria to Türkiye: Case of 2015-2016 (CRC Press, 2025), Radicalization and Indoctrination Processes in the PKK (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025) and Persuasion Processes as a De-Radicalization Strategy in Counter-Terrorism against the PKK (CRC Press, 2025).

Dr. Richard WARNES – Moderator

Consultant at Vedette Consulting Limited, UK.

Dr. Richard Warnes is a senior consultant with Vedette Consulting. He holds a Ph.D. focused on human factors in effective counter-terrorism, as well as a Master's degree in Criminal Justice and a Bachelor's degree in International Politics. With over two decades of experience, Dr. Warnes combines operational, policing, military, and field-research expertise in the areas of intelligence and security. He served in an Army Field Intelligence Team during the Bosnia conflict, and later worked in the UK's Metropolitan Police, including Special Branch and Counter-Terrorism Command. Between 2008 and 2014, he conducted in-country field evaluations of security capacity-building programs in Iraq and Afghanistan, and more recently has been involved in professionalization support for the Iraqi Staff College. Dr. Warnes regularly presents and advises on irregular warfare, terrorism, and security strategy for NATO, the UK Ministry of Defence, and EU institutions. He is also the author of Human Factors in Effective Counter-Terrorism and has published influential studies on pandemic-era counterterrorism trends and community-focused intelligence.

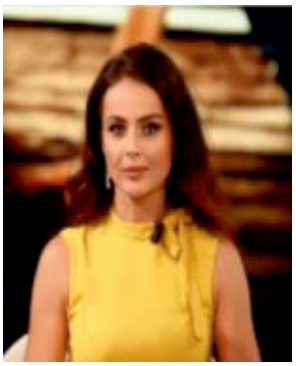
Assoc.Prof. Başar BAYSAL

Associate Professor at Ankara Bilim University, Türkiye.

Başar Baysal is an Associate Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Ankara Science University. He earned his PhD from the Department of International Relations at Bilkent University in 2017 and holds an MA from the Department of International Relations at Marmara University. His research interests include critical security studies, securitization theory, environmental security, peace and conflict processes, wartime economies, and organized crime. His studies focus on Latin America and the Middle East. Previously, Dr. Baysal worked as a post-doctoral research fellow at Universidad Del Rosario in Colombia, conducting fieldwork on the implementation of the Colombian peace process in 2020 and 2021. He is the author of the book Securitization and Desecuritization of FARC in Colombia: A Dual Perspective Analysis. His articles have been published in journals such as Peacebuilding, International Relations, and the International Journal.

Ms. Aleksandra PUCI

Psychologist & Independent Consultant, Albania.



Aleksandra Puci is a licensed psychologist and psychotherapist based in Albania with over 20 years of professional experience. She holds a degree in Psychology from the University of Tirana and has completed advanced certifications in Brain Working Recursive Therapy (BWRT) and psychosexual therapy from institutions in the UK. Her expertise spans trauma, mental health in post-conflict settings, and the reintegration of individuals returning from war zones. She has worked with national and international organizations including the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the Ministry of Defence, Terre des Hommes, and Save the Children. Her work focuses on psychological assessment, gender-based violence, and the intersection of mental health and security, particularly in vulnerable populations.

Dr. Almakan OROZOBEKOVA

Coordinator, OSCE Network for Women Professionals on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism | Project and Training Specialist, OSCE Academy, Kyrgyzstan.

Dr. Almakan Orozobekova is the Coordinator of the OSCE Network for Women Professionals on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism in Central Asia. She is also a Project and Training Specialist at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek. Previously, she worked for the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine and led a research project on terrorism-related issues at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Germany. Almakan earned a doctoral degree from Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. She completed fellowships at the NATO Defense College in Italy, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy in Switzerland, and City University of London. Her publications cover a range of topics, including foreign fighting, violent extremism, and terrorism. Her latest work "Terrorism" in Central Asia in a Multipolar World explores the problem of terrorism in Central Asia.

Mr. Alec WARGO – Moderator

Adviser and Program Officer at United Nations, USA.

Mr. Alec Wargo currently serves as an Adviser and Program Officer with the United Nations, specializing in child protection and humanitarian affairs. With over 20 years of experience, he has held various key positions within the UN system, including the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. Previously, Mr. Wargo worked as a Senior Child Protection Adviser with NATO's Human Security Team in Brussels and served as a Child Rights Investigator for the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. He has also contributed to UN peacekeeping missions and worked with UNHCR and the OSCE on human rights, democratization, and community services. His professional experience spans diverse regions, including the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and West Africa.

Dr. Mathew CHARLES

Adjunct Professor, Universidad Externado, Colombia

Dr. Mathew H. CHARLES is an adjunct professor at Universidad Externado in Bogotá. He researches conflict in Colombia and organized crime more generally in Latin America. He adopts an ethnographic and interdisciplinary approach to understand violence and conflict within high-risk contexts of rebel and criminal governance. His particular interest is the recruitment of children, teenagers and young adults by non-state armed groups and the varying forms of youth participation in conflict and organized crime. His research is based mainly on creative, participative and narrative-based methodologies, which seek to promote peacebuilding and personal/social transformation. He is the founder of Mi Historia, or My Story, a foundation that works to prevent recruitment as well as the reintegration of former child combatants and justice-involved youth. He is currently an adviser to UNICEF Colombia and the Colombian presidency. He is also a visiting fellow in the Faculty of International, Political and Urban Studies at Universidad del Rosario in Bogotá and the Department of Criminology and Sociology at Bournemouth University in the UK.

Dr. Elisabeth SCHLEICHER

Military Advisor, NATO Kosovo Force, Kosovo

Dr. Elisabeth Schleicher is a Military Advisor with extensive expertise in integrating gender perspectives into military operations, currently serving as Deputy Gender Advisor to NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR). She previously acted as Chief Gender Advisor to KFOR's Commander and contributed to gender mainstreaming efforts at the Austrian Ministry of Defense, developing training protocols and instructing at international forums. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Vienna, focusing on peacebuilding in Kosovo, and a Master's in Military Leadership from the Austrian Military Academy. Dr. Schleicher has been a frequent speaker and instructor at international defense institutions, including the NATO School and the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces.

Ms. Anna Amelie MOREL

Consultant, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Austria

Anna Morel is a consultant at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), specialising in the prevention of violent extremism. With a background in law, she works with governments in the Sahel, as well as South and Southeast Asia, to strengthen policy frameworks while promoting a whole-of-society approach. Her work focuses on bridging gaps between state institutions and civil society, with an emphasis on community empowerment, particularly for women and youth, to address the root causes of radicalisation and foster long-term resilience to violent extremism.

Dr. Murat KOÇANLI

Academic, Department of Sociology, Başkent University, Türkiye

Dr. Murat Koçanlı is an academic at Başkent University's Department of Sociology. He served 25 years in the Turkish Armed Forces, retiring as a senior colonel from the Gendarmerie General Command. He holds a bachelor's degree in Systems Engineering from the Turkish Military Academy, a master's degree in Crime Investigations (2005), and a PhD in Sociology from Başkent University (2024).

His expertise includes sociology of crime, criminology, crime prevention strategies, and sociology of migration. He has authored articles, book chapters, and presented papers in these fields.

Annex-C—Workshop Group Photo

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE
DEFENCE AGAINST TERRORISM

Colonel Halil Sıddık AYHAN (TUR A)
Director, COE-DAT

Workshop Director
Ms. Özge ERKAN

Academic Advisor
Dr. Merve ÖNENLİ GÜVEN

Rapporteur
Ms. Elif Merve DUMANKAYA

Contributors
Ms. Burcu SAN
Dr. Richard WARNES
Assoc. Prof. Başar BAYSAL
Ms. Aleksandra PUCI
Dr. Almakan OROZOBEKOVA
Mr. Alec WARGO
Dr. Merve ÖNENLİ GÜVEN
Dr. Mathew H. CHARLES
Dr. Elisabeth SCHLEICHER
Ms. Anna Amelie MOREL
Dr. Murat KOÇANLI

Visit the COE-DAT website.