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## CTC PERSPECTIVES: MILITANT RIVALRIES EXTEND TO FEMALE RECRUITMENT IN PAKISTAN

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In an attempt to keep apace with the latest trends in jihadi recruitment, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) released a 45-page, English-language magazine *Sunnat-e-Khula*<sup>1</sup> in August 2017, named after a historical Muslim female fighter. Although this is not the first time that TTP has released a glossy propaganda publication in English,<sup>2</sup> making a direct appeal to educated Pakistani women is a novel endeavor for the group. TTP's publication is highly reminiscent of the Islamic State's propaganda magazines *Dabiq* and now *Rumiyah*,<sup>3</sup> which dedicate a section in each issue to women's status, roles, and participation in the global caliphate. Female jihadi recruitment is not new, as women have been employed in both active and supportive roles in the Middle East<sup>4</sup> and in Africa.<sup>5</sup> A direct solicitation of female participation in operational activities by TTP, however, denotes a dangerous shift in the group's tactics and potentially in the nature of jihadi violence within Pakistan. Within Pakistan, although groups active in Kashmir have elicited the support of women to popularize jihadi goals, such efforts have largely sought indirect support and have not focused on attacking the Pakistani state itself.<sup>6</sup>

Although the release of this magazine attracted media attention, the discussion primarily suggested that TTP was trying to take advantage of the disintegrating Iraq and Syria portion of the Islamic State's caliphate to appeal to women.<sup>7</sup> However, this article argues that an examination of TTP's local situation within Pakistan provides a better understanding of the true purpose of this magazine. Briefly highlighting the parallels between the Islamic State and TTP's female recruitment efforts, TTP's venture into female jihad is analyzed from the standpoint of the group's weaknesses in an increasingly competitive militant landscape. Pakistan presents a ripe market for jihadi recruitment with a sizeable pool of militants with transferable loyalties and a largely untapped female operative market. As the Islamic State seeks to build a foundation in Pakistan and Afghanistan and as a fragmented TTP grows restless to retain its dwindling resources, competition for female recruits signals a deepening militant rivalry with broader security implications.

### Mimicking Propaganda Efforts

The incentives and opportunities depicted in both groups' propaganda bear remarkable similarities, with TTP tailoring its message for a Pakistani audience. *Sunnat-e-Khula* aims to mobilize women to wage jihad based on the same political issues that act as catalysts for men. It seeks to rally women as members of the global *ummah* to conduct jihad under the TTP banner in supportive and operational roles. The magazine is embedded with references to the persecution of Muslims in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan at the hands of U.S. drone strikes and local governments. Yet, the pitch is not simply a global one. The magazine aims to stir local grievances as well by denouncing the Pakistani government and army for betraying the Muslims of Afghanistan and Pakistan. A war between India and Pakistan is presented as inevitable, where the "last hope for Pakistan are the Taliban."

The TTP and the Islamic State's propaganda depict other common themes that reinforce the criticality of women's specialized roles for their organizations' success. First, TTP specifically reaches out to educated women from urban areas in Pakistan, "doctors, engineers, teachers and nurses" who can disseminate the group's ideology among other women. For example, the article "My Journey from Ignorance to Guidance" relays the story of a female Pakistani doctor performing the *hijrah* from the "West" to Pakistan. Similarly, the Islamic State has called for educated women trained as doctors and teachers to travel to Iraq and Syria while acting as recruiters via social media.<sup>8</sup>

Second, TTP emphasizes the significance of women's traditional roles as wives and mothers to support jihad. An interview of a woman, supposedly TTP leader Mullah Fazlullah's wife, stresses women's role in increasing the group's physical membership through childbearing and indoctrination of their offspring as future fighters. Likewise, the Islamic State has referred to women as "mothers of lion cubs and producers of men."<sup>9</sup> Finally, TTP encourages women to "rise" as the "time of martyrdom has come" and to move beyond passive roles (propagandists, recruiters, fundraisers, and logistical facilitators) toward more active roles. This again runs parallel to the Islamic State's recent ideological shift toward female participation in battlefield combat and the group's subtle call for women to pick up arms if necessary.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the Islamic State has praised women fighting for the caliphate, glorifying Kenyan female suicide bombers and the female San Bernardino shooter, Tashfeen Malik.<sup>11</sup> TTP encourages women to disobey parents or husbands in order to fulfill their obligation to participate in jihad and seek physical and weapons handling training, and carry pistols and grenades. But TTP's message goes even further and diverges from the traditional stance on women's role in jihad, which excludes them from combat.<sup>12</sup> It calls for women to prepare for and conduct "martyrdom operations," and it concludes with a bold call to violent jihad. The magazine directly refers to 9/11 and challenges the "daughters of Hawwa" to "rise up to perform such or even bigger tasks resulting in a harsh blow."

### Within the Context of a Pakistani Landscape

Two questions emerge from TTP's emulation of the Islamic State's female recruitment propaganda: what explains the shift in TTP's tactics, and what are its broader implications for militancy within Pakistan? TTP's female recruitment drive is likely rooted in its own weakening position in Pakistan, exacerbated by the emergence of the Islamic State in the

Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Despite suffering losses in Iraq and Syria, signs of increased Islamic State activity within Pakistan pose a threat to TTP's already diminished status. The drive to recruit women coincides with TTP's ongoing battlefield losses due to intensified military operations and drone strikes in its tribal strongholds.<sup>13</sup> A report by a Pakistani research institution revealed that the military killed close to 800 militants in the tribal and urban areas of Pakistan in 2016, most of whom were TTP members.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, TTP has been plagued with internal disputes, breakaway factions, and member defections to the Islamic State of Khurasan (ISK) in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.<sup>15</sup> General John Nicholson, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, noted that a majority of the Islamic State fighters in Afghanistan are former members of TTP.<sup>16</sup> Thus, TTP's problems are not limited to attacks by the Pakistani military. The group faces mounting challenges to retain membership and likely feels threatened by the growth of ISK. Since the Islamic State's announcement of its Wilayat Khurasan, numerous groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan have expressed implicit or explicit support for the group.<sup>17</sup> In late 2014, TTP disowned its spokesperson and other commanders who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>18</sup> Arrests of Islamic State-linked female groups in Lahore in 2015 and in Karachi in 2016 suggest the Islamic State's growing appeal among women as well.<sup>19</sup> These dynamics have weakened the group's operational capabilities and decreased its clout and dominance in the jihadi circles of the country.

Faced with this scenario, it makes sense for TTP to consider its options and explore new avenues for growth to recuperate its organizational depth and coherence. We have seen both. On one front, it has made attempts to reunite breakaway factions; in February 2017, the Mehsud division rejoined TTP after breaking away from it, due to a dispute in 2014.<sup>20</sup> On the other, it is reaching out to women. An increase in women in violent jihad can be particularly advantageous for TTP due to the low induction of women in the Pakistani police and military. According to the National Police Bureau of Pakistan, women represented only 0.89 percent of the total police force in 2011.<sup>21</sup> This gender gap makes it tactically beneficial for TTP to deploy women for violent operations (or to facilitate them), as only a female officer can physically check a burqa-laden woman for explosives.

The TTP's mimicking of the Islamic State's efforts to recruit women thus appears to be a result of both a need to build capacity and a progression of emergent rivalries between militant groups for regional influence. It does not appear to be a simple copying of tactics from a collapsing Iraq and Syria caliphate, as some have claimed.<sup>22</sup> Although it's currently indeterminate whether TTP and ISK will collaborate or maintain a direct rivalry in the future, there are signs of an outbidding trend among the groups in Pakistan. For example, a suicide bombing in Punjab on February 13 killing 14 persons claimed by a TTP faction was followed by an Islamic State-claimed suicide bombing in a Sufi shrine in Sindh that killed over 70.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, the bombing on July 24 in Punjab claimed by TTP was followed by a suicide bombing by an Islamic State member in Balochistan in August.<sup>24</sup> While the Islamic State claimed a larger growth in the amount of fatalities claimed in Pakistan in 2016, TTP's lethality remained the highest compared to other groups.<sup>25</sup> The broader point is also supported by the number of attacks carried out by each group. Per the Global Terrorism Database,<sup>26</sup> ISK claimed at least 31 attacks in 2016 (up from 19 in 2015) whereas TTP claimed at least 96 in 2016 (down from 108 in 2015).

Taken together, TTP's nascent gender-inclusive jihad signals a potentially dangerous turn in Islamist militancy on Pakistani soil. Although women have largely (although not exclusively) assumed non-combatant roles within Islamist groups, their roles could evolve to encompass more violent operations as Pakistani Sunni jihadi groups vie for political relevance and recruits. Female suicide bombings are rare in Pakistan, but TTP has made use of female suicide bombers in the past. In 2010, for example, a female suicide bomber targeted a World Food Programme distribution center in the tribal areas, killing 45 and injuring 80.<sup>27</sup> While the Islamic State has rarely used female suicide bombers in Iraq, it has become more accommodating and even encouraging of female participation in violent jihad, arguably since it went from being on the offensive to defensive.<sup>28</sup> The group reportedly deployed female suicide bombers in Mosul when trying to maintain hold of the city in July.<sup>29</sup>

Viewed in the context of an increasingly competitive environment, TTP's women's magazine signals the group's desire to employ women for both supportive and operational roles—extending the turf war between ISK, TTP, and potentially other local militant actors to the female sphere. Left unchecked, operational support of Pakistani women to facilitate extremist groups may generate dangerous consequences for militancy and terrorism in the region. A change in recruitment patterns is an early warning of evolving tactics—and one that requires corresponding changes in counterterrorism efforts.

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*The views expressed in this article are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.*

#### Substantive Notes & Citations

[1] The magazine analyzed was obtained from the International Centre for Political Violence & Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) Informatics Team and was provided to the CTC by Sara Mahmood. The magazine has also been made accessible online at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/08/tehcca3ricc84k-icc84-tcca3acc84libacc84n-pacc84kistacc84n-22sunnat-khawlah-issue-122.pdf>.

[2] TTP released an English version of its magazine "Ilhae Khilafat" in 2014. See "Pakistan's Taliban Launches Quality English Language Magazine," NBC News, October 29, 2014.

[3] These sections are present within all issues of Dabiq and Rumiya, with a few exceptions.

[4] Hamoon Khelghat-Doost, "Women of the Islamic State: The Evolving Role of Women in Jihadism," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 8:9 (2016).

[5] Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess, *Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2017).

[6] Among Pakistan-based groups, Lashkar-e-Taiba, which conducts operations in Indian-held Kashmir, has made efforts to win and publicize the support of the mothers of jihadis to facilitate recruitment and build social support for its mission. More specifically, personal stories of the mothers of martyrs are used to inspire other community members. See Farhat Haq, "Militarism and Motherhood: The Women of the Lashkar-i-Tayyabia in Pakistan," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32:4 (2007).

- [7] Elizabeth Mackintosh, "As the Caliphate Crumbles, Taliban Steals ISIS' Tactics to Target Women," CNN, August 28, 2017.
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- [9] Dabiq, Issue 11, Al Hayat Media Center, September 2015.
- [10] Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 10:4 (2017).
- [11] Rumiya, Issue 2, Al Hayat Media Center, October 2016.
- [12] Nelly Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26:5 (2014).
- [13] Operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched in June 2014 with 30,000 troops. The targeted groups included al-Qa'ida, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Emirate-e-Kaukav as well as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). See Farhan Zahid, "The Successes and failures of Pakistan's Operation Zarb-e-Azb," *Terrorism Monitor* 13:4 (2015).
- [14] Muhammad Nafees, "CRSS Annual Security Report 2016," Center for Research and Security studies, 2017.
- [15] Abdul Basit, "IS' penetration into Afghanistan-Pakistan," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11:3 (2017).
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- [17] Basit.
- [18] "Allegiance to IS: TTP disowns its spokesperson," *Express Tribune*, October 21, 2014.
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- [20] Bill Roggio, "Mehsud faction rejoins the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan," *Long War Journal*, February 4, 2017.
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- [22] Mackintosh.
- [23] Syeed Arfeen, "The Islamic State's Growing influence in Pakistan," *World Policy Blog*, April 13, 2017.
- [24] Salman Masood, "ISIS Claims Suicide Bombing That Killed at least 15 in Pakistan," *New York Times*, August 13, 2017.
- [25] Nafees.
- [26] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), Global Terrorism Database [Data file], 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.
- [27] "Woman Suicide Bomber Strikes at WFP centre; 45 killed," *Dawn News*, December 25, 2010.
- [28] Winter and Margolin.
- [29] Bel Trew, "ISIS turns to Jihadist Brides in Last Ditch attempt to hold off Iraqi Forces in Mosul," *Times*, July 5, 2017.

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