



# Joana Cook's Briefing at the United Nations Security Council

## Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts

To the distinguished audience, I thank you for inviting myself and my colleague here today to discuss the report I recently co-authored with Gina Vale. It is an honour for me to present our research on the strategic, tactical and operational engagement of women and minors by Daesh, which requires immediate and urgent attention. While this is a critical concern related to Daesh in particular, it is also increasingly reflected in other jihadist groups today.

Our research has demonstrated the scale of this concern. For the first time, we are able to demonstrate with evidence that across 80 countries, and the estimated 41,490 foreign citizens that became affiliated with Daesh, that 13 per cent of these are women, and 12 per cent of these are minors. This includes at least 730 infants born in theatre to foreign parent(s). Women and minors thus represent 1 in 4 recorded foreigners who became affiliated with Daesh. These figures are unprecedented for a terrorist organisation, and also emphasise the need to consider the broader networks of persons affiliated with such groups beyond only fighters.



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We believe this to be a vast underestimation based on current gaps in data. Of these 80 countries reviewed, only 26 publicly provide reliable figures for both women and minors, meaning we still do not have a full understanding of the scale and scope of this concern. These figures exclude those that were prevented from travel to Iraq and Syria, and local women and minors within the conflict zone who may have become affiliated with Daesh – whether willingly or coercively. Women and minors have been two vastly underestimated and under-analysed populations, suggesting their risk of neglect in all assessments and full spectrum responses related to Daesh.

Why were so many women drawn to Daesh? By presenting itself as an ideologically pure, state-building project, and holding and administering territory between 2014 up to late 2017, it gave women an opportunity, a perceived stake, and sense of purpose in building this proto-state. It drew persons as diverse as schoolgirls to grandmothers from five continents. These women expressed feelings of discrimination, oppression and disenfranchisement in the communities they left behind, and believed Daesh offered them meaningful roles ranging from 'citizens', mothers and wives, to public sector workers. Women within this territory and abroad also sought, and carried out more nefarious roles and acted as police, recruiters, fundraisers, and disseminators of propaganda, mobilising both men and women for Daesh.



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Daesh achieved the support of women through targeted, gendered recruitment efforts in its multi-lingual propaganda, which utilised language and imagery that emphasised women's rights, empowerment, sense of purpose and belonging offered by their 'caliphate'. It also exploited their personal and political grievances; framed their participation as a religious obligation; and promised services ranging from free healthcare and education, to marriage arrangements, amongst others.

The factors that pushed individuals out of their societies and pulled them towards Daesh and its ideology are diverse, complex, and have to be assessed on an individual basis. We also recognise that levels of agency and motivation differed for each – some women were ideologically committed and actively sought to support Daesh, travelling independently, or with their children or families, while various levels of coercion were seen with others.

Daesh also sought to promote the recruitment of minors within and beyond its physical territory, raising its 'cubs' as the future fighters and ideological guardians of its 'caliphate' project. The group's propaganda has displayed systematic indoctrination of boys and girls through its education system. For boys in particular, enrolment in military training camps was mandatory, with the aim to psychologically and physically recondition young recruits to fight and engage in violence. With this, Daesh has sought to project an image of strength, bolster its fighting force, and even 'weaponise' minors.



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Similar to women, minors are not a homogenous group; they experienced diverse recruitment pathways into Daesh and held varied roles. These roles range from passive 'citizens' of the 'caliphate' and child brides, to spies, combatants and executioners. We therefore recommend three sub-categories of Daesh-affiliated minors in line with gender and age considerations as an indicator of the varied levels of individual agency, and therefore accountability. These are infants under four years old, many of whom were likely born inside Daesh territory; children aged five to fourteen who mostly appeared to be taken by their parent(s) or guardian(s); and teenagers from ages fifteen to seventeen, some of whom travelled independently.

The physical fall of the so-called 'caliphate' represented a significant turning point for the group. However, we do not believe this to be the end of its relevance or activities, only a period of evolution, and thus a particularly important period to assess the current and future status of its affiliates – including women and minors. An estimated 7,366 Daesh affiliates or 20% have now returned to their home countries, or appear to be in repatriation processes to do so. However, only 256 (4%) of total returnees are recorded as women. In contrast, up to 1,180 (17%) of total returnees are recorded as minors, suggesting there has been a prioritisation of repatriating minors by some Member States.



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The current status of the significant number of women and minors beyond returnees also requires immediate attention and clarification. We have identified women and minors as detainees in Iraq and Syria; in IDP camps; as persons still associated with Daesh in Iraq and Syria; as those in third party countries; and some who have been killed. More concerning perhaps are the vast numbers whose status remains unknown. We also highlight important concerns related to the status of orphaned and stateless minors, whose only identity may have been one affiliated with Daesh, and who require particularly targeted and tailored interventions.

We believe that women are poised to play an important role in carrying forward the ideology and legacy of Daesh. This is based off a number of considerations including the motivation of some to pass this ideology to their children; the nefarious and support roles they held in Daesh; shifting discourses related to women's roles within the group; and combat training some women received under Daesh. Numerous attacks – both successful and foiled – have demonstrated the security risk some women can pose.

Minors have likely been largely traumatised by Daesh violence they witnessed, and, in some cases, actively conducted. There is evidence that male child and teenage 'cubs' have already been engaged in suicide attacks beyond Daesh's immediate territory, and the group's propaganda continues to call for and inspire its 'soldiers' of all ages to conduct guided and independent attacks overseas. However, we also recognize that many women and minors are unlikely to become security threats, and may instead seek to disengage from the group and its ideology.



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Our research has reaffirmed the critical importance of integrating considerations relating to gender and age in assessing the range of threats posed by Daesh and its affiliates, ensuring this is reflected in CVE, military, criminal justice, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

Mr. President, this moment presents both exceptional challenges for us as an international community, but also an opportunity. We now have an evidence base that recognises that women and minors - as two distinct and nuanced groups - must be accounted for in our understanding of contemporary terrorist and violent extremist groups. Only by having a stronger evidence base – both qualitative and quantitative - will we be able to develop more effective, holistic, and sustainable responses.

Thank you.