"VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE"

Benefits and Implications of Women Participating in Processes of Preventing Violent Extremism in the Syrian Arab Republic

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August 2016

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August 2016

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Word count: 19,943

Artist of painting front page: Reem Yassouf. From the collection: ‘Little cries’. Used with the authorisation of painter.

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Acknowledgements

The master thesis is seen as the crown upon a year's worth of studying and learning. It is a rite of passage from being a student to becoming an anthropologist and entering the real field. When I started the research for this thesis, I had no idea my field would end up being a field of policy. But now I am grateful to have learned so much about the power of women in politics.

My thanks go out to several people who have helped me with my research and writing my thesis. Many of the women I spoke to told me about how this topic affected them and their desire for outside world to know about their stories and experiences. These women have touched my heart and I am passionate and grateful to be able to share my work and plea for the involvement of women in policies about peace and security. By sharing their stories, these women hoped the international world would better understand the real life situation in Syria. This has made my research more than a graduation requirement. I want to share the voices of the women I spoke to, to help them in their struggle for justice and a peaceful future for Syria. Most of all I want to thank them, for without their help, this thesis would not have come to life.

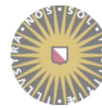
I want to thank GPPAC Foundation for providing me with the opportunity to work on this dynamic research topic. My internship at GPPAC Foundation has made the research environment available for me and enabled me to participate in the gender policy field.

Finally, I would like to thank my supervisor Drs. Nienke Muurling for her encouragement, feedback and guidance during my fieldwork and the writing of my thesis.

Marike Hermens

"At a time when armed extremist groups place the subordination of women at the top of their agenda, we must place women's leadership and the protection of women's rights at the top of ours." – Ban Ki-moon[1]

[1] Epigraph: Statement of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to the Security Council: open debate on Women, Peace and Security on 13 October 2015. http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=9134 Visited on April 18, 2016.



1. Introduction

> I walk into the room. It is the common living room of a nursery home that is being rented for free every Sunday to the organisation that I am visiting today. The women look up as I walk in and smile to me. I sit quietly in the chair in the corner and listen to the women singing André Hazes, 'De Vlieger', as part of their Dutch learning lesson. It is a sad song, and it almost seems to take them back in time, to a memory of their homeland and all the people they have lost or have left behind. All of them have a piece of paper in their hands with the Dutch lyrics. Some women use the paper to take notes, while other women just listen quietly to the song that is being played on a mobile phone. About fifteen women are gathered here. Most of the women wear *hijabs,* but two of them have their hair exposed. There is a plate of simple Syrian cheese made from fresh curd and caraway seeds on the table, made by the husband of one of the women. The woman invites me to try a piece of her cheese. Once the lesson is over, the women gather in the kitchen for tea and chat happily to one another in Arabic. Two women come up to me and invite me to engage in a conversation with them. I ask them about their country and they immediately describe the beauty of their homeland. They seem proud of the rich culture and nature of Syria and would hope to see Syria rebuild one day so they can show the beauty of their country to the outside world. One of the women wears a beautiful black and white *hijab* and tells me that her son of eleven years old is already determined to become an engineer so he can help rebuild Syria when the war is over. She is beaming with pride when she is talking about her son, but then the sadness overrules this feeling when we talk more about the war.

Within anthropology women have always been present in ethnographic research, due to the exploration of kinship and marriage interests. The critique from women on this discipline in the early stages was one of representation. While male ethnographers portrayed women as passive agents, excluded from rituals, female ethnographers described women as having a central role in daily life. This critique led to the 'new anthropology of women' began in the beginning of the 70s' which contested the portrayal of women in anthropological work. This was called the 'male

bias', where certain expectations of the relationship between men and women were brought into the field and women were seen as subordinate to men. The task set by feminist anthropologists was therefore to deconstruct the male bias within anthropology (Moore 1988, 1-2). Feminist anthropologists not only contested this bias, but also questioned the biological construction of the notion of gender. According to these feminist scholars gender is a cultural construct and it is important to take gender into account in order to understand how an identity is formed (Mascia-Lees 2000, 10). The minimalist definition for the term 'feminism', by the feminist scholar Moore, is "the awareness of women's oppression and exploitation at work, in the home and in society as well as to the conscious political action taken by women to change this situation". Here women are not seen in different social and historical contexts, but as a sociological category. This implies a 'sameness' which is threatened by the concept of difference (Moore 1988, 10-11). To uncover social inequality and injustice in the world, it is important to take gender into account as a factor affecting people's lives. Although in today's western civilisation gender does not restrict one's self being as much as it used to, there are still many societies where there are significant discrepancies between the access of men and women to opportunities and resources (Mascia-Lees 2000, 10-11). This thesis will use feminist anthropology as the framework in which the theory will be embedded. This means that a certain sensitivity towards different women's voices is strived for and that I will create space for the stories of the women in the field to be heard, in order to understand what is really happening there (Walley 1997, 334). This polyvocality indicates a concern for multiple voices, which differs from the 'sameness' Moore (1988, 11) implies within gender as a sociological category.

The Syrian Arab Republic is a society with existing and still growing gender inequalities. The ongoing conflict in Syria has had a serious impact on its population and in particular on women, due to increased sexual violence and discrimination (OECD 2014, 1). Not only has Syria been all over our news and media due to its internal conflict but also due to the current hot topic of violent extremism. With the rise of The Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) in Syria and since the recent bombings on Paris and Berlin are being linked to returning foreign fighters and so called home-grown extremism there is a growing interest in this particular type of violence

and how it is related to terrorism.[2] With the growing relevance of the topic of violent extremism, there is also an increased interest in taking preventive measures against such actions. The bulk of literature about the prevention and combatting of violent extremism is continuously expanding. This includes literature about the roots of violent extremism, violent extremism in European countries and religious extremism (Atran 2010; Bartlett and Miller 2012; Lowndes and Thorp 2010). Gender- based violent extremism and sexual violence are also receiving greater attention. The UN 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women was the first international instrument explicitly addressing violence against women.[3] Since then, many variations have been made on this Declaration. The participation of women in extreme violence and terrorism is becoming more visible as well (Brown 2013; Carter 2013; Fink, Zeiger and Bhulai 2016; Kneip 2016). This also casts attention to the possibilities women can have in combatting and preventing violent action.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged in a statement in 2015 to the Security Council to increase the empowerment of women in order to tackle the economic gender division and violence against women. The epigraph used at the beginning of this thesis shows his opinion on the urgency of female leadership and women's rights. He was of the opinion that women should have a central role in development strategies and be more engaged as peacemakers in order to create an inclusive and effective strategy.[4] When he made his statement, it was fifteen years ago that the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 was signed on women, peace and security reaffirming 'the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security'.[5] Now, almost 16 years later it seems that not much has changed when we look at conflict areas. Despite increased awareness of

[2] ACAMS TODAY 'Lessons Learned from the Paris and Brussels Terrorist Attacks' http://www.acamstoday.org/lessons-learned-paris-brussels-attacks/ Visited on May 9, 2016

[3] UN: Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993 http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm Visited on April 28, 2016.

[4] Statement of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to the Security Council: open debate on Women, Peace and Security on 13 October 2015. http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=9134 Visited on April 18, 2016.

[5] Landmark resolution on Women, Peace and Security. http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/ Visited on April 20, 2016.

the potential of women the actual participation of women to help combat or prevent these violent actions remains low. Women are still depicted as one of the largest target groups of extreme violence and seen as 'victims' of male domination and harassment. Because of this, women in conflict situations are often securitised. This victimisation of women can be viewed as an obstacle for female participation in peace processes, as it portrays women as helpless agents and in need of protection rather than capable of having a voice (Leisenring 2006, 307). Because of their marginalisation as passive 'victims' the potential of women often goes unnoticed and is underutilised (Schnabel and Tabyshalieva 2012, 3). A gender-sensitive lens towards peacebuilding demonstrates the urgent need of including women and women's empowerment in both public and private settings. The women activist network is increasingly lobbying and advocating for female participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding and calling to discard the 'victim' narrative (Schirch 2012, 59).

Another disturbing factor coming from women's activists on the ground is the growing threat which accompanies the branding of their activist work as gender- or violence prevention related. A big warning is coming from women's organisations working in the field about the naming of their work as Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) or gender related, which is turning them into targets and making working conditions very difficult or even nearly impossible (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015). Framing their activism in a way that shows what they are doing is thus dangerous as it increases the threat of violence towards them, making it more difficult for women to work as activists on the frontline. The power of framing is not only visible within activist work but also throughout other topics in this thesis. Framing is the construction of meaning, which involves agency and reality construction. Important to the topic of framing is understanding who holds power over this meaning construction and the politics of signification (Benford and Snow 2000, 614).

Structure & Research Question

This thesis aims to explore the current forms and characteristics of women activism in Preventing Violent Extremism and shed light on the opportunities available for women's activists in Syria, as well as to identify the challenges they face. The central question that evolves from

the previously mentioned challenges about the role of women in preventing measures for violent extremism and that guides this thesis is the following:

> What are the benefits and implications of women and women's organisations participating in processes of preventing violent extremism in the Syrian Arab Republic?

In order to address this question, this thesis aims to find answers to the following issues; the relationship between violent extremism and violence against women and girls in Syria; the way in which women and women's organisations are working with PVE in Syria; the benefits of including a gender sensitive approach on PVE in Syria; and the obstacles women face in participating in preventing violent extremism measures in Syria.

The amount of literature about the importance of women in prevention processes is growing. Gender sensitivity and inclusiveness within peace building is now a hot topic amongst scholars and peacebuilding or women led organisations and the positive aspects of women participating in peacebuilding processes is constantly highlighted. What is not or barely mentioned in the literature is another important aspect of women participating in violence prevention activism (ActionAid Report 2016; Brown 2013; Carter 2013; Fink, Zeiger and Bhulai 2016; Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015; McKay 2004). It is important to not only express the need of female participation in peacebuilding processes, but also to highlight the complexity and challenges they face in preventing violent extremism and branding their work as PVE. The academic relevance of this thesis is therefore twofold and will focus on two different debates. On the one hand this thesis focuses on women empowerment and gender. I want to substantiate the important role that women can play in preventing and countering violent extremist groups and violent extremist acts and the importance of a gender sensitive approach to preventing violent extremism. On the other hand this thesis focuses on the dangerous side and violent aspect of conflict. I want to use this thesis as a way of highlighting the growing threats and obstacles these women face when entering this field of practice. Here I want to show the ambivalent role of women working as activists on the frontline. Despite these risks, women are still working as activists and it is therefore important to understand what draws these women to the field. This double character of women's participation on the frontline is important in order to address the

full potential of women in peacebuilding. As social relevance this thesis can help contribute to policies concerning gender sensitivity and inclusion of women in peace processes. Acknowledging the obstacles women encounter enables us to work towards sustainable solutions. This thesis shares the voices and experiences of the women on the ground. Furthermore, this thesis aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the conflict in Syria and the role of women's activism in Syria.

This thesis is conducted in co-operation with GPPAC Foundation, a civil society led network organisation aimed at preventing violent conflict and building peace around the world. One of their priorities is the mainstreaming of gender within conflict prevention. Their vision is that "sustainable peace can be achieved only with participation of all members of society regardless of any particular aspects of their identity such as gender, religion, race, class, age or nationality".[6] Women should therefore play an active role as change agents on conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes. One of the focus areas of GPPAC Foundation is the MENA region.[7] In this context and due to the extensive network of GPPAC in the MENA region the country of Syria is chosen as focus of this thesis.

This research is based on four months' worth of desk research at the GPPAC Foundation in The Hague and on fieldwork, where the field consists of all the informants of relevance to this thesis. The research field for this thesis is that of policy making. This field mainly focuses on social relations. A scattered range of informants move in this field, from Syrian activists currently in Syria and those who have fled to the Netherlands, as well as Dutch activists working on this topic. The informants that form the basis for this thesis are mostly women. I have participated in the policy field of gender in the Netherlands through GPPAC and established my network of informants this way.

As a researcher it is important to be aware of the different roles that you perform towards your informants. Within a research project you create a researcher-informant relationship. This is called rapport. Rapport arises when both parties have a shared interest in the other and help each other reach a common goal (De Walt 2011, 47). As part of the GPPAC team I was assigned a certain role. As I conducted this research in collaboration with GPPAC Foundation I am first a

[6] GPPAC Foundation. Gender working theme. http://www.gppac.net/gender Visited on 29 June 2016.
[7] GPPAC Foundation. Regional Secretariats. http://www.gppac.net/ Visited on 16 June 2016.

representative from GPPAC towards the informants, and a researcher second. Tsing argues that we need a critical distance in order to understand the changing world or understand the influence of our own participation in research (Tsing 2000, 328). In order to know what factors can influence the data outcome, I need to be aware and critical of my two roles towards my informants. This double identity created by my representative role of GPPAC creates distance and proximity at the same time.

The field of policy making is institutionalised not only in the conflict context, but also in politics, organisations and global policies. It is important to attend these sites to understand the global impact of these projects. By studying the landscape of prevention measures as a set of projects of imagining and making globality the field of this thesis is expanded and different forms of analysis are needed (Tsing 2000, 328-329). Triangulation of these forms of analysis is used in this thesis in order to maximise its validity by combining multiple methods and empirical material. Triangulation of these various methods, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, ensures more validity in drawing a conclusion from the data (De Walt 2011, 128). The main three methods used are first, a literature review where different arguments are assembled and information and policy analysis on topics as gender and PVE are reviewed. This is used as a solid basis for this study and will provide information on the theory and concepts of gender and Violent Extremism. Second, the lived experiences and opinions of the women in the field are used as empirical material through which they are allowed to let their voices be heard. This information is collected through the use of informal (phone) conversations and semi-structured interviews. As Ghorashi (2005, 367) addresses: “A researcher should raise some orienting questions, but the character of the interview should be such that the narrator feels free to express her complex and conflicting experiences”. This polyvocal approach ensures the empowerment of women in the field within the victimisation debate and helps to strengthen and support the theory and literature review in this thesis. Thirdly, I use participant observation. Participant observation is defined by Boeije (2010) as the process in which the researcher builds and maintains a multilateral and relatively long-lasting relationship with a certain group in its natural environment in order to obtain a scientific understanding (Boeije 2010, 59). In this research it is not possible to do participant observation in the ‘natural’ environment of the Syrian informants, as this is a war-zone. This ‘natural’ environment is shifted to locations where the informants can

work safely and the relationship between informant and researcher is maintained through regular and in-depth contact. Here participant observation is possible in the context of conferences, attending meetings of organisations, meetings with informants, phone conversations and the research environment at GPPAC. This helped built rapport with the informants and the obtained data has formed the basis of this thesis. The literature review together with participant observations, interviews and informal conversations conducted with experts from the field will provide a complete and thorough understanding of the benefits and consequences of women's activism in Preventing Violent Extremism.

The outline of this thesis is as follows; the second chapter will give a brief history and overview of the Middle Eastern and Northern Africa region, in which I will focus on the Middle East and in specific Syria. I will start by offering an outline of the problematics in the Syrian context. These problematics include the Syrian conflict, but also how this conflict is framed. The third chapter will contain a literature overview of the different approaches to the theory that will accompany this thesis. Here I will describe what violent extremism is and the different forms in which it appears. The framing of violent extremism is important, as it portrays the narrative in which it needs to be contested. In addition, it will provide information on how violent extremism is taking shape in the Syrian context. In the fourth chapter I will elaborate on the gendered dimension and the role of women in violent extremism. It is important women are seen as active agents who are able to participate in preventing processes rather than as 'victims' of violent conflict. I will shed light on the actions of women and women's activists in and from Syria who participate in preventing violent extremism actions. The fifth chapter will outline the barriers and threats women and women's organisations face when working in the field of violent extremism prevention and working on the frontline. As these threats are growing, the work of activists is made more difficult. The concluding chapter will give a summary of the findings of this thesis and includes recommendations for future policy making and action plans for the inclusion of women in PVE. I will argue that instead of being seen as mere victims, women are especially important in participating in preventing violent extremism. This is due to their bottom-up approach and deep understanding of the local context. I will argue that women therefore need to be empowered in order to create inclusive prevention processes.

2. On: The MENA Context

The Middle East and North Africa, often addressed in the acronym of MENA, is characterised by a Hobbesian state of nature in which war and conflict seems to be inherent. It has been five years since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and the individual civil wars in countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen are now seen as the main source of the instability in the Middle East (Milton-Edwards and Hinchcliffe 2001, 1). Millions have fled the conflicts, but there is still a large group of people living in the war-torn country of Syria. In order to understand the contemporary conflict in Syria, it is essential to first understand the recent turmoil in the wider MENA region. In this chapter I will first examine the context in which the Arab Spring arose and how these demonstrations spread to Syria where it turned into one of the bloodiest conflicts of contemporary times. I will investigate the different sides of the conflict, both from the Assad regime's perspective and the violent extremist group ISIS. Then, I will show the way in which the war is framed by different parties and how this can be seen as a political game of interests.

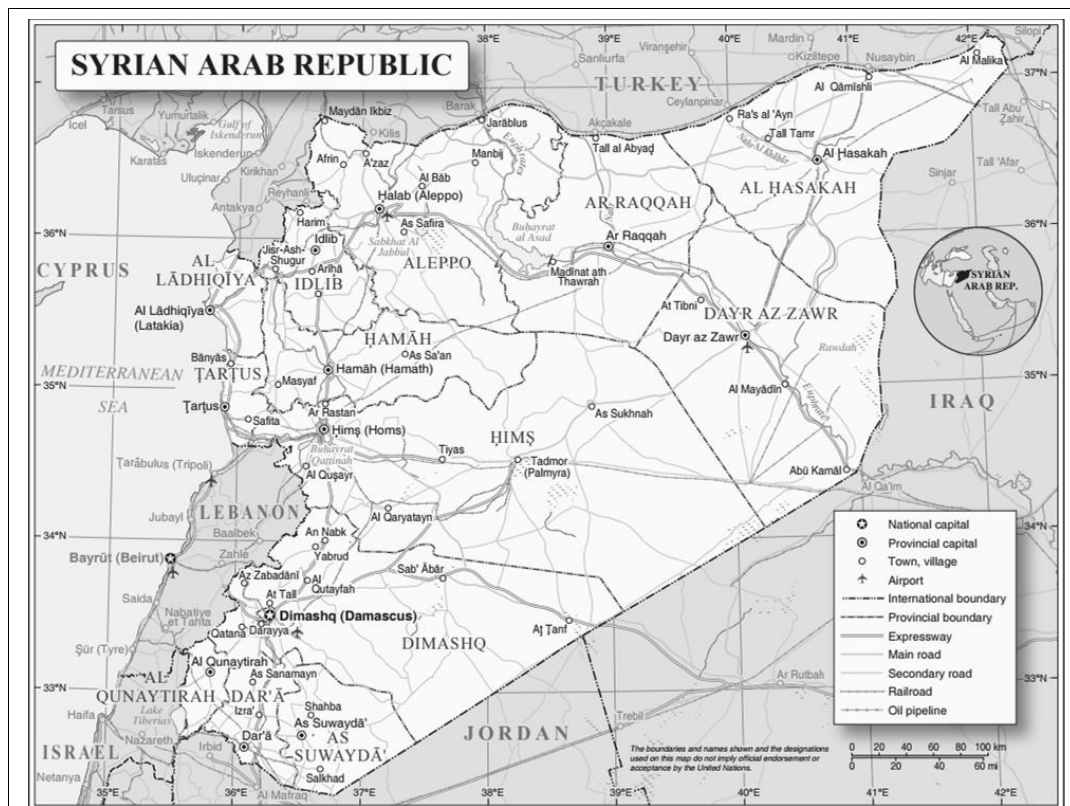


Figure 1: Map of Syria and its direct neighbours
Source: http://www.un.org/depts/Cartographic/map/profile/syria.pdf

The Arab Uprisings

The MENA region is one of the regional civil society networks of GPPAC Foundation.[8] Although in this thesis the focus will mostly be on the Middle East and Syria, it is important to know the historical context of the whole region, as first; GPPAC holds a regional focus rather than a country focus, and second; the Arab Uprisings did not only take place in the Middle East, but in the entire MENA region. The MENA region encompasses an extensive region, extending from Morocco all the way to Iran. Currently the MENA region is situated in a state of uncertainty. Many countries are suffering under civil war, including Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen, causing extensive numbers of home-fled people, the largest number of refugees since World War II, damage to human beings and the destruction of economy and infrastructure.

In 2011, now five years ago, the Arab uprisings started to feed the media and news, showing the world the dynamics of political vision and struggles in the MENA region. Starting in Tunisia and sweeping from North Africa to the Middle East, authoritarian regimes became exposed to mass-scale protests (Bhardwaj 2012, 77). Starting as a series of anti-authoritarian protests and riots, both violent and nonviolent, Egypt, Yemen and Tunisia were exposed to changes within an uncertain period of transition. Syria and Libya on the other hand were drawn into a civil conflict. Although the outcome of the Arab Spring has been brutal and the situation has largely exacerbated, progress was also made and the struggles and ideals of the Arab Spring remain salient.

In the first phase of the Arab spring the images on the news were largely of men participating. Later on it became evident that women also covered and participated in the protests and on every level. Some individual women became known as portraits and leaders of the uprising, but women also stood together with men in these protests, for example in the Tahrir square in Cairo, Egypt and in Iran, where there is a long history of women activism and political participation (Al-Ali 2012, 27). Also in countries known as being more conservative, such as Yemen and Syria, women joined the protests and demanded for gender rights, called for reforms, political transparency, democratisation, human rights and an end to corruption (Al-Ali 2012, 28). History shows that revolutionary processes have opened up space for women in the political and

[8] GPPAC Foundation http://www.gppac.net/about-the-network. Visited on 7 June 2016.

social sphere. Unfortunately, history has taught us that the transitional period of a revolution can also lead to the marginalisation of women where they can lose many of the rights they have fought for or that were promised to them (Al-Ali 2012, 28). This backlash of women's rights is especially clear in the aftermath of the Arab spring in the context of the Syrian Arab Republic.

The Syrian Arab Republic

To understand why the Arab Spring turned violent in Syria, it is important to know how the current Assad regime was established. After World War I Britain and France divided the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The north of the Ottoman Empire was assigned to France, which included Lebanon and Syria (Fildis 2012, 148). During the colonisation of France the Sunni Muslims who form the majority of Syria developed a strong Arab nationalism, which was perceived as a threat by the French. Therefore, the French administration made friendly connections with the Druzes and the Alawites who belong to the Shiites (Fildis 2012, 148). The country declared independence from France in 1946 and in 1970 Hafez al-Assad, who belonged to the Alawites, was chosen as the new leader of Syria. He brought stability to the country after chronic instability and several political coups which followed the signing of the Declaration of Independence. However, this stability came at the consequences of a full police state and violent repression. The death of Hafez al-Assad and the nomination of his son in 2000, Bashar al-Assad, as the new Syrian leader was the first time political and economic spaces opened up for reform. The establishment of Bashar prevented protests similar to those in Tunisia and Egypt to occur, partly because of his Western education. After the implementation of small reforms by the new leader failed and the regime continuously remained repressive and not open to dissent the prevention of protests led to a crackdown (Lilli 2016, 185; Bhardwaj 2012, 85). Other elements that triggered the protests were high rates of unemployment, inflation and lack of representation of politics in public (Noor and Hyp 2016, 736). During the Arab uprisings, many Syrians therefore took part in the demonstrations and went to the streets of Damascus to demonstrate for the overthrow of the government of Bashar al-Assad. This conflict began on January 26, 2011, and evolved into one of the bloodiest conflicts of the Arab uprisings (Bhardwaj 2012, 84). Assad responded to these demonstrations with extreme violence. At the start of the uprisings, activists who had gathered in the main square of Aleppo to protest were beaten by Assad devotees with

axes. As the conflict evolved, this response changed to include the use of guns and shootings.[9] A sixty years old Syrian woman who lives in the Netherlands with her son was a communist activist prior to the conflict and remembered the violence of Assad during the Arab Spring. She was arrested at the start of the demonstrations by the municipality when she was renewing her passport to visit her son. She told me that her history of activism got her arrested and put into jail with other women activists. During the two days she spent in jail she witnessed other women being raped and tortured, as a warning for her to show the implications of participating in the protests.[10] This example shows the iron fist of Assad against peaceful protests and his response to activism in Syria even before the conflict. Assad has tried hard to suppress the rebels, but there was no exclusive victory for either Assad or the rebels, which is why in present day Syria has become a warzone and a war-torn country on the brink of collapse (Noor and Hyp 2016, 737).

To understand why the dynamic of the Arab Spring evolved into the Syrian conflict, two factors are important. First is the location of Syria in the Middle East. Syria directly neighbours Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon. This creates a strategic location at the centre of the Middle East (Lilli 2016, 185). The second factor is the heterogeneous religious and ethnical composition of the Syrian society. About 90 per cent of the Syrians are ethnically Arabs, followed by the Kurds who are the largest minority group with 7 to 10 per cent of the population. (Lilli 2016, 185; Noor and Hyp 2016, 737). Religiously, over 70 per cent of the Syrians are Sunni Muslims, followed by three other Muslim groups, including the Alawites, Druzes and the Ismailis, and some Christian fragmentations. Nevertheless, the country is managed by the minority group of the Alawites (Shiites) which is the origin of Bashar al-Assad and his son (Lilli 2016, 185). The establishment of this ruling as shown before had its roots in the colonisation by the French (Fildis 2012, 148). This is an important underlying factor to the conflict. The Sunni Muslims, Kurds and other minority groups such as Christians still experience repression and increasing fear every day in this ethnic and sectarian war, and as a result Sunni and some Kurdish groups have taken up arms in the conflict (Lilli 2016, 185; Noor and Hyp 2016, 737).

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[9] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 24, 2016.
[10] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 24, 2016.
*All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement

Following the Arab Spring the rising of ISIS, which calls itself the Islamic State (IS), gave way to another threat in Syria. They are one of the biggest examples of a Sunni group who has taken up arms against the Shiites, or the 'apostates'. Their intentions is to seize territory and form a Sunni led Islamic State which is governed strictly on the principles of *Sharia*. They want to destroy the political borders of the Middle East created by Western authorities and create a global *khilafa (*caliphate) with political, religious and military authority over the Muslim population (Cronin 2015). ISIS was founded after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Different Sunni extremists combined forces with the aim to fight U.S. forces and Shiite civilians. Founded in Iraq, they first utilised the name of al Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and their leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had established an alliance with Bin Laden. When he was killed in an airstrike in 2006, AQI almost fell apart. However, they reunited and renewed themselves in Iraqi prisons and within these newly established networks, they assigned a new leader and caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Using the chaos caused by the civil war against Assad in 2011, AQI expanded their focus to Syria in 2013 and seized territory in the Northeast of Syria, where they renamed themselves ISIS (Cronin 2015). Since their expansion to Syria they have rapidly made military gains. By July 2014 ISIS controlled one third of the county's territory and a large amount of its gas and oil production (Drakaki 2016, 289). According to the UN about 9.3 million Syrians have suffered from the internal war against Assad and ISIS and are in desperate need of humanitarian help. Of this number, Syria holds up to 6.3 million internally displaced people (IDPs), and 2.3 million Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries, including Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt (Noor and Hyp 2016, 737-738). The amount of deaths as a direct result of the war are also extremely high. The Assad government could, according to evidence smuggled out of the country, be held accountable for over 11,000 systematic killings of detainees (Drakaki 2016, 289). According to the documentation of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, ISIS was held responsible for 1,366 deaths in 2015, while forces of the Assad government have caused the death of 12,044 people.[11]

[11] Syrian Network for Human Rights 'A comparison between the death casualties who were killed by the Syrian regime and ISIL during 2015 according to SNHR archives.' http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/01/02/16116/ Visited on June 20, 2016.

Framing of the Syrian War

What is happening in Syria is often defined in different and conflicting forms. The conflict in Syria is mostly defined as a civil war (Milton-Edwards and Hinchcliffe 2001; Noor and Hyp 2016), but other authors refer to it as a revolution or insurgency (Bhardwaj 2012; Carpi 2013). The term civil war is often used interchangeably with terms as intrastate conflict, insurgency, revolution, genocide or loss of the monopoly of violence by a ruling government (Bhardwaj 2012, 77). Noor (2016) writes that a civil war is above all seen as an internal state conflict, and she does not differentiate between civil war and armed conflict within a country (Noor and Hyp 2016, 733). According to Bhardwaj (2016) civil war is defined by; the enclosure of the war territory within the borders of an internationally recognised state; the government being one of the actors involved in the conflict as an armed entity; the clearly defining of the opposing group, which uses violence to reach their goals but are distinct from terrorists or other delocalised groups; and a civil war must have a minimum of 1000 deaths in the first year of the conflict (Bhardwaj 2012, 77). It is important to create a conceptual framework of what is happening in Syria. Framing the war in a certain way can change the way the international community is allowed to interfere. Defining the war in Syria as a civil war limits the possibility for intervention from an international level as the sovereignty and autonomy of the Syrian state are still intact. On the other hand, calling the conflict an insurgency allows for international interference and the justification of foreign troops to be send to Syria (Bhardwaj 2012, 79). In this way the framing of a war becomes a political game of interests. According to Bhatia (2005) 'To name is to identify an object, remove it from the unknown, and then assign to it a set of characteristics, motives, values and behaviours' (Bhatia 2005, 8). The recognition of a conflict as a civil war, insurgency or revolution therefore is heavily dependent on certain political or ideological agendas, when there is no clear definition of what a civil war is. Thus the question becomes if the war in Syria is in fact a civil war, and if not, what is happening there and how it must be defined.

If the term 'civil war' is seen in a Hobbesian manner where civilians are socially conflicting in doctrinal and political terms with their neighbours, possess and use weapons against each other, this may be relevant to Syria (Carpi 2013, 75; Milton-Edwards, 1). However, Carpi (2013, 75) believes that the general opinion is that the term civil war does not represent the

Syrian reality and that the term 'revolution' would fit the situation better. This is because the conflict is caused by the doctrinal frictions of the authoritarian state since 1969 which has the purpose of dominating the different groups in the country (M., S. and A. in Carpi 2013, 75). Because the Jihadist group of ISIS is not limited by state sovereignty due to their ideological goals and does not recruit new rebel forces solely at a local level, the Syrian war turns into a multinational conflict zone (Bhardwaj 2012, 77). According to ISIS it is religiously led ethnic and sectarian war (Noor and Hyp 2016).

Not only wars are assigned certain labels. The same thing is done with the various groups involved in the conflict. In Syria the labelling of ISIS is an important part of the political agenda. They are known as Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Islamic State (IS) by Western commentators, or Da'esh by some Arabs (Edwards 2015, 12). The women interviewed for this thesis also call this group by the name of ISIS in my company, but when talking together they refer to ISIS as Da'esh.[12] I use the name of ISIS in this thesis, since this is the common name used in English by my informants. World leaders also use framing processes to underline their agenda. The name Da'esh is an acronym for the Arabic phrase al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham, which means Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. However, there seem to be two reasons why ISIS does not want this word to be used. First, it is similar to the Arabic words 'Daes' and 'Dahes', which means 'one who crushes something underfoot' and 'one who sows discord'.[13] Another reason is because the term Islamic State or IS refers to ISIS as being a state, which it is not according to President Barack Obama and the French Minister Laurent Fabius, and the name Da'esh refers to ISIS as a movement, instead of a state, which is ISIS perceives as an insult.[14] In one of the speeches of President Obama, he claimed that ISIS is "a terrorist organisation, pure and simple", giving them the label of terrorists. On the other hand, Cronin (2015) believes ISIS cannot be defined as a terrorist group which must be countered by counter terrorism, but should be seen as a party fighting in a conventional civil war, which must be destroyed in a full-on conventional war (Cronin 2015). These different labels can have dangerous consequences when

[12] Interview with a Syrian woman, July 24, 2016.

[13] Mirror: 'What does Da'esh mean? ISIS 'threatens to cut out the tongues' of anyone using this word' http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/what-Da'esh-mean-isis-threatens-6841468. Visited on June 20, 2016.

[14] Volkskrant: 'Waarom spreekt Hollande over 'Da'esh' in plaats van IS?' http://www.volkskrant.nl/buitenland/waarom-spreekt-hollande-over-Da'esh-in-plaats-van-is~a4187782/ Visited on June 20, 2016.

a wrong interpretation is used. According to journalist Jason Burke concentrating on labels 'is to misunderstand not only its true nature, but the nature of Islamic radicalism then and now' (Burke in Edwards 2015, 14). The variability of interpretation, which means that a portrayal of a certain group or person can be biased, is associated with how groups and persons are described. This makes war not only physical, but also a conflict over discourse, to ensure that a certain point of view triumphs (Bhatia 2005, 7).

Social movements also frame their behaviour and collective action in certain ways. As the famous quote says; "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter". In order to understand the dynamics and character of a movement such as ISIS, their framing processes need to be regarded (Benford and Snow 2000, 612). Movement actors like ISIS are significant agents actively engaged in the production and maintaining of the politics of significance to their followers and opponents. Their framing activities are a construction of reality called collective action frames, intended to mobilise and gain support (Benford and Snow 2000, 613-614). ISIS has shown great skills in the use of social media to build their name and credibility. According to the social media analysis of Farwell (2014), a US Special Operations Command advisor, ISIS uses a narrative to portray itself as 'an agent of change, the true apostle of a sovereign faith, a champion of its own perverse notions of social justice, and a collection of avengers bent on settling accounts for the perceived sufferings of others'. By using social media like twitter, mobile phones and Facebook, they are able to reach an audience not only in Syria but across the entire world (Farwell 2014, 49-50). In 2014 the mainstream media was targeted with brutal propaganda videos of beheadings of ISIS hostages. These horrific videos of victims dressed in orange jumpsuits, forced to read out statements against Western governments written by ISIS members followed by the brutal elimination of these hostages, are burned into the memories of many. These videos articulated the extremist ideals of this group and utilised the media to portray their new idea of terrorism in the form of violent extremism. By portraying themselves as 'fearsome warriors' in these photos and videos, they try to intimidate their opponents, while at the same time releasing photos of their soldiers hugging kittens, to show their warm side towards their followers (Farwell 2014, 49-50). If you look at other propaganda videos they frame Western leaders as 'liars' and 'fornicators'. They call themselves 'soldiers who stop the idols of nationalism'. They use the Islamic *Jihad* and the name of Allah to justify their war and violence

and say that it is the ‘glory of faith that unites us’.[15] These images have come to symbolise the ending of the Arab revolts in Syria and the brutal beginning of violent extremism expressed with online appearances through the politics of signification (Westmoreland and Allen 2016, 206).

Women are also an important subject in framing processes of ISIS. ISIS believes that if a man is killed by a woman, he loses his place in heaven (Alsaba and Kapilashrami 2016, 5). As men are obligated to participate in the battlefield of the *Jihad* and women therefore are not (Aslam 2012, 93), new ways need to be found to recruit women for their cause. The group has released a manifesto in which they elaborate on the role of women in the group. The manifesto was uploaded by the all-female Al-Khanssaa Brigade’s media wing onto different Jihadist forums and translated and analysed by Charlie Winter (2015). The document is designed to draw in women from countries in the region, idealising their position and proposing, amongst other things, that women will face a decrease in crimes against them due to the protection of their *hijabs* and emphasising on their good public services like non-mixed schools and hospitals. At the same time the manifesto points out the duties of women and how they must uphold their ‘chasteness and purity’ (Winter 2015, 39). According to the manifesto ‘the greatness of [a woman's] position, the purpose of her existence is the Divine duty of motherhood’ and to raise the next generation, which is her fundamental role and rightful place in line with the *Sharia*, while men take up the dominant position within Islam (Winter 2015, 18).

This terminology debate is also an issue in the reconciliation and peace processes in Syria. As the division is partly due to the repression of the government and the political crisis, a bottom-up reconciliation approach where every day individual relationships are addressed would therefore not be enough. It is thus important that any reconciliation attempt is aimed at reconciling the state with its opponents, rather than between groups of individuals (Carpi 2013, 75). The terminology debate affects peace processes, as stated previously, because of legitimacy of interference on an international level and this politics of labelling is thus an important part of war making and peace building (Bhardwaj 2012, 79). Consequently, calling it a revolution or a civil war can affect the outcome of a war and should not be overlooked. In addition, the naming of groups in a conflict affects the outcome of peace processes. When naming a group a terrorist or a violent extremist group, the door to peace processes is closed while another door to military

[15] ISIS propaganda videos: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adAJLi0bSe4 Visited on 29 June 2016.

involvement and often a bloody war is opened. This also closes the door to the involvement of women in the prevention of conflict, since the focus is shifted from prevention to combatting (Bhatia 2005, 5).

Foreign policies of involvement in a conflict is heavily depend on whether they are called a civil war or revolution. The UN peacekeeping missions changed in the 1990s from interstate to intra-state conflicts and civil wars, due to the rise in civil conflicts around the world. However, international policies constantly prohibit the involvement of the UN in peacekeeping operations. In article 2.4 of the Charter of the United Nations "prohibits the threat or use of force and calls on all Members to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of other States". This article makes the state the main actor of safeguarding the protection of its population. When conflicts are of an intra-state nature and therefore the conflicts are the internal affairs of sovereign States, intervention is more difficult.[16] Revolution often brings to power new regimes, and foreign countries will depend their involvement on their own interests, whether it is better to befriend this new regime, overthrow or isolate it. Foreign states can be tempted to intervene to improve their own position or prevent other states from doing the same thing. Therefore revolutions open a window for international suspicion and insecurity (Walt 1996, 4).

A contradiction can be seen in the intervention of the international community in Syria. With first the civil war and later the uprising of the ISIS rebel group there has been an interesting development in intervention strategies. At the regional level Iran has been a persistent supporter of Assad because of its dominant Alawite state structure (Allison 2013, 795). At the global level Russia is the main cause for providing a diplomatic shield for the Assad regime. Despite the human right violations in Syria by the Syrian government and rebel groups, the UN was not able to intervene in the first stages of the conflict and the international community has failed to adopt a consistent/coherent/common position to end the violent conflict in Syria (Lombardo 2015, 1192). Although Kofi Annan prepared a peace plan for Syria in April 2012 with the hope of establishing a ceasefire, Chinese and Russian threats to veto the adoption of a resolution by the Security Council has made intervention nearly impossible. This non-intervention in the Syrian conflict renewed the fighting in 2013, and has opened up the way for the expansion of extremist

[16] UN Charter II. Prohibition of the threat or use of force under Article 2, paragraph 4 (2012-2013) http://www.un.org/en/sc/repertoire/2012-2013/Part%20III/2012-2013_Part%20III.pdf#page=7 Visited on 19 July 2016.

groups into Syria in 2013, such as Hezbollah and ISIS (Allison 2013, 795; Drakaki 2016, 297; Lombardo 2015, 1192).

With the rising influence of ISIS and the mass atrocities they have executed, the non-intervention of the international community against Assad changed and turned to this extremist group. A preventive military intervention was started by the U.S. under the name of "our fight against violent extremism".[17] This military intervention is conducted by the US-led international alliance, including both European and Arab states (Chandler 2015). Russia has been intervening as well, by supplying Assad with arms in order to combat ISIS, and assisting them in bombardments on ISIS strongholds. Syrian women see this contradiction as well, and they say that the way in which the international media frames the conflict in Syria is mostly directed at ISIS as the 'terrorist' group, while they believe the conflict started with the implementation of the Assad regime who, according to my informants and research of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, has been responsible for more deaths than ISIS.[18] They say that the Western media wants to frame the conflict as an 'Islamic' terrorist conflict, rather than calling it a civil war with Assad.[19]

[17] Quote from President Barack Obama in his speech against violent extremism. February, 2015. http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-oe-obama-terrorism-conference-20150218-story.html Visited on 19 July 2016.

[18] Syrian Network for Human Rights 'A comparison between the death casualties who were killed by the Syrian regime and ISIL during 2015 according to SNHR archives.' http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/01/02/16116/ Visited on June 20, 2016.

[19] Interview with a Syrian Activist and a Syrian woman, July 24, 2016.

3. On: Violent Extremism in Syria

> Violent extremism represents not the resurgence of traditional cultures but their collapse as young people unmoored from millennial traditions flail about in search of a social identity that gives personal significance and glory. This is the dark side of globalisation (Atran 2016, 199).

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in Syria five years ago, and the regime of Assad has violently responded to the peaceful protests, the once peacefully meant revolts have turned into violent conflict and attracted different forms of violent extremism. The uprising of ISIS and the regime of Assad have become a magnet for extremist fighters from across the region and the entire world. This rise of violent extremism forms a threat to the internal security of Syria. Efforts to fight violent extremism are increasing, but often lack a clear definition of violent extremism and have inclusivity issues. In order to understand how violent extremism can be prevented in Syria we first need to look at what violent extremism is. In this chapter I will start by giving a definition of violent extremism and showing the problematics of not having a clear definition. This is again an issue of framing politics, and therefore giving a definition is important in order to have a clear image of the phenomenon talked about throughout this thesis. I will then give an outline of the forms of country specific violent extremism in Syria and the role of women in this type of violence. Then I will talk about different measures against violent extremism and the efforts of the international community in preventing violent extremism.

Violent Extremism and the Politics of Naming

After the attacks of 9/11, the 'Global War on Terror' was declared by the Bush administration, with the incentive of the global architecture to counter terrorism. But the absence of having made a concrete definition of 'terrorists', 'terrorism' and what it entailed has been under great debate and further problematizes the creation of a solid foundation for international law (Bhatia 2005, 7-15). Right now violent extremism is becoming a hot topic amongst scholars. There is a bulk of literature on how to detect and react to Home-grown Violent Extremism (HVE) and especially on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PVE/CVE) (Atran 2010; Bartlett and Miller

2012; Lowndes and Thorp 2010). Most of this research is on how and why people are drawn into violent extremism and how we can combat or prevent it, but there remains little information about defining violent extremism. Not only is this the case in literature, also governmental organisations fail to properly use a definition of the term. One of the main reasons for this controversy is that those who make and use these definitions have a tendency to alter them to match their own political agendas and ideologies. Neither the United Nations nor the European Union has an official definition of violent extremism. United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is an organisation that works amongst others on the crisis in Syria. They do have a definition, and define violent extremism as "advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives. [Violent extremism] often manifests itself at the individual level and in highly informal, diffuse networks".[20] This definition is limited and misses crucial factors to be able to define violent extremism. It is not clear who acts out on violent extremism, are these solely non-state actors; how can this type of violence be separated from violence used by more legitimate actors in conflicts; does it always has to have an objective, or can it be purposeless; and what is the distinction with terrorism? Since there is no definition agreed upon by the international arena, violent extremism and terrorism are used interchangeably. The UN says in his plan of action to prevent violent extremism that "violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition", but that it must be addressed as and when it is conducive to terrorism (United Nations Report 2015, 1). This can result in a broader range of counter terrorism measures that are being used against forms of extreme violence that are not directly qualified as terrorist acts, but that are justified under the denominator of 'violent extremism'. It is thus important to point out that the use of the term 'violent extremism' without having a definition in place is problematic because it is such an emotive and loaded term. Often violent extremism is associated in the West with Islamic violence, ignoring other ideological violent acts. The perspective is of great importance when looking at violent extremism. This is again about the politics of signification and who holds the power to interpret (Benford and Snow 2000, 614).

[20] USAID Policy (September, 2011). The development response to violent extremism and insurgency https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI_Policy_Final.pdf Visited on April 4, 2016

Who defines what is extremism and what is violence is therefore something that needs to be taken into consideration when reading statements and reports on this complex topic.

The Australian government is one of the few institutes and the only government who has provided a concise and elaborate definition of Violent Extremism and their different forms on their website: "Violent extremism is the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals".[21] The definition by the Australian Government addresses the goals of violent extremism, while the definition of USAID addresses the acts that include violent extremism.[22] I have composed the definition that I use in this thesis by using the definition of USAID and the definition of the Australian government. I have also included the actors involved in violent extremism in this definition, and therefore I believe that it is more comprehensive:

> Violent extremism is advocating for, engagement in, preparation of, or support from a group or person of ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives. All forms of violent extremism seek change through fear, terror and violence rather than through peaceful means.

Saying that violent extremism is caused by fear, terror and especially violence is what distinguishes the radicalisation of individuals and groups with violent extremism. Radicalisation does not necessarily mean that people will turn violent. According to a study of Bartlett and Miller (2012) there are two types of radicalisation amongst individuals who hold radical views; radicalisation that leads to violence and radicalisation that does not lead to violence. Radicalisation is the process by which "individuals are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs towards extreme views". To radicalise in this manner means rejecting the status quo, but does not equals violent actions (Bartlett and Miller 2012, 2).

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[21] The Australian Government. What is violent extremism? https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/aboutus/Documents/what-is-violent-extremism.pdf Visited on May 3, 2016

[22] USAID Policy (September, 2011). The development response to violent extremism and insurgency https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI_Policy_Final.pdf Visited on April 4, 2016

According to the definition of the Australian government on violent extremism there are three different types to identify. First, there is ideological violence. This is ideological justified violence based on patriotism or a belief of superiority to other cultures and races. This can also be motivated by religious beliefs and justified using religious texts or influential religious leaders, but additionally can still have political motivations. Second, there is issue-based violence. This is violence directed to a single purpose, for example anti-government, anti-globalisation or anti-capitalism. Third, there is ethno-nationalist or separatist violence. This involves violence of individuals and groups which is based on race, ethnic or cultural background.[23] Ideological or religious motivated violent extremism is the type of violent extremism that will be discussed in this thesis. Examples of this type of violent extremism in Syria conducted by extremist groups are for example ISIS. The violence used by the government of Assad is also ideologically based, and comes from a belief of superiority of the Shiites. They use violence to suppress the population and to install their government.

Violent extremism does not arise automatically but is the result of various causes. According to the report of the UN general assembly on violent extremism grievance, the feeling of injustice, the will of change and empowerment arise when human rights and good governance are being violated and ignored (United Nations Report 2015, 2). Countries where there is a lack of socioeconomic opportunities and where there is a lack of jobs, high poverty and unemployment and corruption are more prone to violent extremism. The marginalisation of a particular group in a country and the monopolistically acting of another group at the expenses of other groups, regardless of their demographic size, causes inequality, discrimination and alienation and also the opportunity for extremist groups to arise. This creates a collective idea of victimisation and can provoke grievances over perceived oppression. Although these conditions affect large groups of people, only a few are drawn into violent extremism. Individual motivation and agency are an important part of decisions to radicalise (United Nations Report 2015, 7-9). Most of today's Jihadist who radicalise into violent extremism are young adults who are in transitions stages of their lives, of which about one in five do so through their families. Perceived global injustice resonated with frustrated personal aspirations pushes youth into violet

[23] The Australian Government. What is violent extremism?
https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/aboutus/Documents/what-is-violent-extremism.pdf Visited on May 3, 2016

extremism. The serving of a 'greater cause' within a band of brothers makes Jihad seem heroic (Atran 2016, 198).

Violent Extremism in Syria

In the calculations of the United Nations Report over 30,000 male foreign terrorist fighters have been recruited by violent extremists to fight in and for countries including Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Yemen (United Nations Report 2015, 2). The extremist group of ISIS has transformed the challenge of violent extremism in Syria. They are very mobile, proficient in the use of technology, and well-armed and organised. They use the already existing instability and armed conflict in Syria and take over large territories which they then govern through their own rules (United Nations Report 2015, 4). They have committed serious violations of the international law, such as conducting genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Also the rights of women and girls have been violated, through means as forced marriages, enslavement and the constraining of their right to education and participating in the public sphere. ISIS and other violent extremist groups in Syria especially have targeted, murdered and displaced religious groups, women, youth, activists, human right defenders. Often reported as well is sexual and gender based violence (United Nations Report 2015, 5-6). A Syrian female speaker at the conference for Violent Extremism in Syria spoke about her experiences with the start of ISIS in her home-town al-Raqqa and how fast life changed under their control:

> When extremism in al-Raqqa begun, they started with undermining activists of civil society. Between 2013 and 2014 al-Raqqa became under the definite control of ISIS. For 8 months, I lived and worked as a medical doctor in a hospital under ISIS control. The city was not very religious at first, but everything changed overnight. It started with the imposition of rules. A dress code was implemented and women had to wear a black coat from head to toe. We took an oath to help all people, anyone wounded, anyone religious, but ISIS forbade me to help wounded men. It was my moral commitment to help all people![24]

[24] Quote from one of the speakers at the conference 'Women on the Frontline', April 1, 2016. http://www.womenonthefrontline.eu/?p=730&preview=true

The pull for youth into the violent extremism of ISIS is partly due to the inspirational leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also known as Amir al-Muminin, or the “Prince of Believers”, and the self-declared Caliph of the Islamic State. To join they demand *bayat*, which is a formal oath of loyalty and agreement with their strategic vision and have ultimate control over operational decisions; however, enlistment into the group is often elective, especially for foreign volunteers, and tactical decision making is generally decentralized. (Atran 2016, 199).

But violent extremism in Syria is not only conducted by ISIS. Violent extremism takes form on both sides of the sectarian divide. The Assad regime has, according to the informants of this study, more extremist acts on their name than ISIS. Since the early days of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, followers of Assad have executed violence and killings to everyone who dared to speak of freedom, to ensure its ruling power and its monopoly of providing services. When we look at the definition of violent extremism used in this study, the violence used by Assad is, one: ideologically motivated, two: used to further economic and political objectives, and three: seek change through fear, terror and violence rather than through peaceful means. Therefore it falls within the lines of the definition and can be qualified as violent extremist acts. Then the question is; why does the international community not acknowledges the violence of Assad as violent extremism? This seems to connect to the reason why international institutions match their definition of violent extremism to their own political agendas. ISIS can be linked to terrorism and the Islam, while the violence of the regime of Assad is put in the framework of a civil war. Assad also claims that he is the only alternative to the Islamic State, while ISIS claims it fights for the oppressed Syrians.[25]

Women in Violent Extremism

Although the phenomenon of women traveling to Syria to participate in Violent Extremism is new and most of the literature is addressed to men participating in VE (Atran 2010; Lowndes and Thorp 2010), there is growing knowledge about women being recruited for Violent Extremism. Tarlo wrote an article about Muslim women who hold extremist views, as a response to the existing dominant ‘Western’ stereotype of Muslim women being backward and oppressed, and to

[25] Information compiled from several interviews conducted with Syrian women in the Netherlands

show new anthropological perspectives on this matter. The women she writes about discard 'the shallow Western values of freedom, equality, liberation and secularism', and see themselves as modest and capable of thinking for herself. The women in her study protested against the ban of the *jilbab*, and passed around leaflets with the writing 'all women are slaves', since they said to find fulfilment in their enslavement to Allah (Tarlo 2005, 13-15). ISIS has recently been able to recruit hundreds of women from around the entire world, of which more than 550 women came from the West. Participating in this so called female '*Jihad*' is mainly through non-combatant forms. Since ISIS does not allow women to fight, except when the 'enemy' attacks and there are not enough fighters, according to the manifesto of the Al-Khanssaa Brigade (Kneip 2016, 89; Winter 2015, 22). Although the pull factor of emancipation for these women is still seen in Western eyes as an act in a highly patriarchal system, for a large number of women this emancipation is a very important factor (Kneip 2016, 89). According to Kneip (2016) there are several other pull factors as; taking control over their own lives as a response to parental restrictions; in search for an identity, sense of belonging and sisterhood; taking this independent decision concerning their future and lives; gaining respect from the community as female Jihadist; and freeing themselves from Western restrictions and views of them as victims of Islam. A major other reason for recruiting women as well is that the *jihad* fighters have required women to marry and so sexual and marital being supported (Kneip 2016, 93).

Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy states that violent extremism must be addressed in all its forms and wherever it occurs, because it undermines peace and security, human rights and sustainable development (United Nations Report 2015, 1). There has been a discussion about the way in which violent extremism must be opposed. Measures of countering violent extremism (CVE) are most known since this is related to measures of counter-terrorism. Counter-terrorism is measures of practices, techniques and strategies implemented by governments, military and businesses/agencies to combat terrorism. Countering violent extremism is similar to these measures, but is instead directed specifically at violent extremism (Fink, Zeiger and Bhulai 2016). Preventing violent extremism (PVE) is also a common term that is used in combatting VE. The United Nations Security Council has underscored the importance

of measures and collective action against violent extremism and focuses on preventing violent extremism by "preventing radicalisation, recruitment and mobilisation of individuals into terrorist groups and becoming foreign terrorist fighters" (United Nations Report 2015, 2).

Sometimes these two measures are used interrelated and without a clear definition of what is means. But there is an important difference between PVE and CVE that must be acknowledged. CVE mostly is executed on a top-down level, such as governances, military and intelligence agencies. The prevention of violent extremism on the other hand can also be executed on a grassroots' level and often the local context is seen as an important part of PVE strategies. Another difference is that countering is post-development of violent extremism, whilst prevention focuses on root causes of violent extremism and tries to inhibit the emergence of this type of extremism and ensuring that violent extremism does not take root in the first place. Effective prevention requires integrated strategies across all actors involved in the context (Hampson and Malone 2002, 6) In this thesis the focus will be on preventing violent extremism (PVE) because of its possibility of including a bottom-up perspective, incorporation of local actors and the addressing of root causes.

The international agenda on Women & Preventing Violent Extremism

The Charter of the United Nations, published in 1945, stated that there must be taken measures for "the prevention and removal of threats to the peace", which is the first promise of the Charter.[26] Yet there still lies a challenge in shifting from reaction to prevention for the international agenda. Most current international prevention programmes are focused on international organisations and actors, and do not think about the means and consequences on the local level that can be used in combatting violent extremism (Hampson and Malone 2002, 6). United States Deputy Secretary of State Burns said before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations:

> The rise of extremism in the Levant poses an acute risk for the United States, and for our regional partners, It is essential that we intensify our efforts to isolate extremists in Syria,

[26] Charter of the United Nations 1945. http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/index.html Visited on 29 June 2016.

> limit the flow of foreign fighters, bolster moderate opposition forces, ease the humanitarian crisis, and help key partners defend against spill over.[27]

The U.S. acknowledges the threat of extremist fighters to their own national security interests. They work together with neighbouring countries including Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan in order to strengthen their capacities and try to defeat extremism in Syria by isolating these groups and cutting them off financially. This is the strategy of countering violent extremism, which is mostly executed on a top-down level, such as governances, military and intelligence agencies (Fink, Zeiger and Bhulai 2016).

The United Nations has made an action plan for the prevention of violent extremism against groups such as ISIS, Al-Qaida and Boko Haram, which was presented on 15 January 2016 by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly. In this plan the Secretary-General calls for a more comprehensive approach that includes not only the essential security-based counter-terrorism measures, but also steps for preventive measures to address the root causes that drive individuals into violent extremist groups. They have set seven key pillars that must be addressed in this preventive approach, which are; dialogue and conflict prevention; strengthening good governance, human rights and the rule of law; engaging communities; empowering youth; gender equality and empowering women; education, skill development and employment; strategic communications and the social media.[28] This is an inclusive action plan, which acknowledges not only the move from combatting to prevention, but also the inclusivity of actors on every level. Part of their gender pillar is the inclusion of women in national law enforcement and security agencies, and building the capacity of women to engage in the prevention of violent extremism. What is still missing in this action plan is how women can engage in prevention and what their qualities are.

Although policy on prevention processes for violent extremism and inclusivity sound optimistic and promising, there still remains a gap between these policies and their implementation. Women on the local level in Syria think differently about the implementation of

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[27] The Syrian Conflict and Extremism, March 12, 2014. http://editorials.voa.gov/a/syrian-conflict-extremism/1869435.html Visited on 29 June 2016.

[28] UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. 15 January 2016. https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/plan-action-prevent-violent-extremism Visited on 29 June 2016.

these action plans. For them there is no direct notice of including women in prevention processes. Often in peace- or negotiation talks women are not or merely present.[29] The action plan of the U.S. is executed with a top-down approach and misses the link to the local level, where the women are present. In order to have effective strategies of prevention, it is necessary to include strategies on a local level next to a top-down strategy. Strategies on the local level help to anticipate and avoid consequences that can trigger violent extremism (Hampson and Malone 2002, 6).

Another issue addressed by women activists in Syria who plead for peace is the international drive to re-occupy Syria from ISIS. There seems to be a consensus of ISIS as being the biggest problematic in Syria and that when ISIS is eliminated, the country will have peace again, while the problematic in Syria has started with the ruling of the Assad regime since 1970. One of the Syrian informants had a strong opinion about international interference in Syria: "The biggest misconception of people in the West is that ISIS is the only occupier. One occupation force made place for the next occupation force. We have to go back to the root causes of ISIS." Including the local level helps to look at the root causes and women will have a voice in the peace processes, so they can show what the biggest problematic is in Syria.

[29] Data from the Syrian Country Group for the Dutch National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security. May 26, 2016.

4. On: Women on the Syrian frontline

> "Behind every strong man stands a strong woman."
> (Informant, July 10, 2016)

In order to prevent violent extremism in Syria in an inclusive way all levels of society must be included. Gender is a key dimension that should be incorporated into inclusivity discourses. This means that not only men, but also women need to have a role in the processes of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In this chapter I will focus on the role of women in these processes. I will start by looking at gender roles in conflict, in order to understand why women are often excluded from peace processes. I will then present a framework of the threats of violence against women in conflict and how this is used as a weapon of war. Then I will argue that a shift is needed from seeing women solely as victims to important agents. Finally, I emphasise that women's activism is crucial in preventing violent extremism.

Changing gender roles in wartimes

Gender means the historical and social construction of role differences and power relations between men and women in a society (Ramsbotham, Miall and Woodhouse 2007, 265). Gender is socially constructed, which means that it has the possibility of limiting, expanding and affecting a person's opportunities in life (McKay and Mazurana 2004, 17). When talking about gender it is crucial to keep in mind that the gender roles of men and women in any society are not static and that they evolve over time, due to globalisation processes, conflict and transition periods. Gender inequality still exists in the world and women and girls often have fewer opportunities to a stable livelihood and economic opportunities, and to education (McKay 2004, 154).

Cultural norms shape gender roles within conflict zones. According to Aslam (2012, 31) roles of men and women in war are formed by the already existing cultural and psychological understanding of constructed gender roles. Therefore "women in a war setting mostly appear as nurses, mothers, prostitutes, camp followers, rape victims and even peace activists" (Aslam 2012, 31). Women in Syria have played a central role in society and were seen to reinforce

cultural traditions. When the new Syrian state was formed after the independence from France in 1946, traditional gender roles were seen as remnants of a patriarchal order. Syrian women struggled to claim their role in political participation and gained voting rights in 1949. But because Syria remained largely patriarchal, state building and national security became a priority over the furthering of women's participation in civil, economic and political spheres. Religious institutions remained embedded into politics, which was regressive for women and brought constrains for their participation into public spheres and economic opportunities. This increased their dependence on the male members of their families and therefore based a women's position upon family ties. Because this reduced their bargaining power, this also increased their vulnerability in conflict (Alsaba and Kapilashrami 2016, 4-5; Lilli 2016, 185). With the Arab Uprisings in Syria in 2011 women became key political actors in the continuous struggle for their power within the political sphere, as both victims and perpetrators. Through mobilising the non-violent movement, women gained a new recognition in the communities, but the extensive violence overshadowed and challenged this position (Alsaba and Kapilashrami 2016, 5).

Consequences of conflict are far from being gender-neutral. Due to gender hierarchies and power inequalities that worsen insecurity, women experience conflict differently than men. This results in a lower ability to act upon security needs because of this low status of women in certain countries. The consequences of conflict are not only based on gender, but also on age, education social status and income. Young women that are affected by war are in some cases much more stigmatised than older women, while women and girls who faced physical harm, especially from sexual violence, have very little hope of ever returning to a normal life (McKay 2004, 153; Schnabel and Tabyshalieva 2012, 13). Effects of war range from the constant experience of fear, having to take refuge, being abandoned, enduring physical and sexual violence, losing one's possessions, and the disruption to one's daily life. Obligatory military service also has an important role in how conflict affects people in it, and is experienced differently for men and women. In Syria men are expected to fight and therefore have to leave the house to fight, flee, and face a higher rate of casualties. Women are then faced with the complete care of the household. She becomes responsible for everything, and her first concern and basic need is for the safety of her family, from feeding her children to their education. Abel and Richters (2009) have done research on how women in Eastern Uganda remember three

decades of civil war. The women in their study told them that they had to continue with the chores in their households and trying to live up to social expectations and remaining loyal to their role. This made fleeing for them more difficult than for men, because leaving their children behind was never an option (Abel and Richters 2009, 344). Next to often losing husbands in the conflict, women lose their sons as well. The young soldiers are obliged to fight and taken away from their mothers.[30] Since the uprising of ISIS in Syria, women are facing growing restrictions in their daily lives. Women no longer have the freedom to go outside, unless they are accompanied by a man. But with the vast majority of men fighting, having fled or being killed, a lot of women now are experiencing house arrest.[31] Another implication that came with the conflict is the restrictions of headscarves. Due to the threat of being raped, women started wearing headscarves when going outside. Because they did not want to be found provocative and seductive they started to cover themselves. Before the uprising 20 per cent of the women wore headscarves and now, according to a female Syrian informant, this percentage has now gone up to 80 per cent.[32]

Gender-related Violent Extremism in Syria

Conflict is also often accompanied by violence against women. Sexual violence in war times is not new. Since the beginning of wars violence against women has been documented as reward of the conquerors or victors to treat women assex slaves or sexually assault their enemies. Rape is the most common form of sexual violence in the history of conflict (Noor and Hyp 2016, 735). Violent Extremism often appears in societies where there already is an unequal gender division. Cultures where gender-based violence is already present can see an increase in this type of violence during conflicts. This type of violence is therefore likely to continue even after peace processes have started. Violent Extremist groups who have a conservative gender agenda are likely to victimise women and target them with acts of violence. Tools that are used by these groups involve rape and sexual violence towards women and girls, although men have also been

[30] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 24, 2016.
[31] Article by Hibaaq Osman - founder and CEO of Karama, an NGO that seeks to end violence against women and promote women's participation across the Arab region. http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/this-is-the-brutal-effect-of-war-on-the-women-of-syria-a6841856.html Visited on 14 June 2016.
[32] Interview with two Syrian women, July 24, 2016.

targets of these types of violence by female perpetrators (Carter 2013, 2; Schnabel and Tabyshalieva 2012, 13)

Through violence perpetrators can express differences in power and construction. By exerting sexual or violent dominance the other will feel inferior. Sexual violence is then used as a way to classify a certain group as the dominant group and to present an order of priority (Nencel 2007, 102). Sexual violence can also strategically be used to break ethnic boundaries. Sexually assaulting a wife of the enemy is contributing to the acquisition of territory and psychological benefits. This is used as a tool to strengthen ethnic boundaries by taking sexual possession of the ethnic other (Nagel 2003, 44-46). Rape has severe consequences and leads to psychological damage of rape victims and their families (Noor and Hyp 2016, 735).

Violence against women in Syria, including sexual violence, has been used as a psychological strategy to defeat the opponents, making women the most interesting target during this conflict (Noor and Hyp 2016, 734). Before the revolutions in Syria rape was used as a weapon to warn supporters of Communist groups. The daughter of a friend of one of the interviewees was raped because of her father's membership, after which she committed suicide due to the trauma she had suffered.[33] But patterns of the violence against women before the conflict in Syria remains largely undocumented, because reporting these types of violence was seen as a threat to the social cohesion in society (Alsaba and Kapilashrami 2016, 5). However, rape became even more common in Syria after the start of the conflict and was even directed to young girls and children. A study of the Quilliam Foundation by Benotman and Malik (2016) shows the story of two young women who were raped by ISIS members in Mosul, and one of the women heard the screams of girls who were taken to another room. According to this study, young women and girls are raped by ISIS members on a daily basis. Young girls were also sold to ISIS fighters, and as a young woman in this study tells they, when they were bought, were raped and beaten (Benotman and Malik 2016, 45). A Syrian woman whom I talked to told me the fear she felt in Syria every time her two little girls went outside. Fear that they would be caught and raped, as so many other children she had known. Still when she falls asleep in her home in the Netherlands, she is haunted by nightmares about her children getting raped.[34]

[33] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 24, 2016.
[34] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 24, 2016.

The territories under control of ISIS in Syria, such as al-Raqqa, have the highest rate of socio-economic and political insecurity. This evokes a backlash against women's rights, which is often "expressed through violence and articulated in the form of defending cultures and traditions" (Alsaba and Kapilashrami 2016, 5). ISIS also influences the way in which women and girls are approached with sexual violence. The manifesto of the all-female Al-Khanssaa Brigade's media wing of ISIS has stated that girls from the age of nine are eligible to get married. Here they state that from that age on "she faces myriad restrictions and an imposed piety that is punishable by *hudud* punishments", with which they justify violence against girls and women when they do not fulfil their duties as good housewife (Winter 2015, 7-8).

Women within the Victim Narrative

Due to this violence addressed to women, women are considered as victims, and are presumed to only having auxiliary roles in the occurrence of violent extremism, for example as a mother. Men and boys are therefore assumed to be the key targets of PVE efforts. This leads to the instrumentalisation and securitisation of women within the 'victim' narrative. When women are framed within the victim discourse you simultaneously enable and constrain them. Enabling because you acknowledge that they have suffered and need help, and constraining because you take away their agency by making them seem helpless. The woman becomes someone who suffered harm she cannot control because she is powerless and weak, and who deserves sympathy and an outsider to help her and/or take action against the victimiser (Leisenring 2006, 307). Because of this marginalisation of women as victims, their potential is underutilised. Although they are often at the end of violence and oppression, the victim narrative allows them visibility through their suffering but not through their potential as agents (Schnabel and Tabyshalieva 2012, 3).

Being a Muslim woman brings even more concern with victimisation narratives due to the existence of stereotypes. Muslims and the Islam have had a resilient occurrence of stereotypes, which in current mainstream media and public culture is characterised by 'radicalisation' of Islam (Osella and Soares 2010, 1). The bodies and practices of women mark the boundaries of the discourses of 'Otherness' of Islam. These concerns towards Muslim women have been mainly focused on two areas, the headscarf and the participation of women in

the public sphere (Deeb 2009, 107-108). Images of the 'veiled' Muslim woman have travelled through the Western imagination as being the subordinate 'Other'. This veil has become a symbol of oppression and is a popular opinion in Western mainstream discourses. This is due to assumptions about its relation to limitations for women to participate in public spheres and because the participation of women in the public sphere is a Western assumption of status. The common knowledge of oppression by religious extremist groups to impose the burqa on women is another example why Muslim women are seen as being repressed and helpless (Abu-Lughod 2000, 784-785; Deeb 2009, 108; Osella and Soares 2010, 1). What results from this is that Muslim women are being represented simultaneously as 'victims of social backwardness, icons of modernity or privileged bearers of cultural authenticity' (Osella and Soares 2010, 7). The narrative of Muslim women in need of saving is seen in various strategies and text, for example the famous quote of "White men saving brown women from brown men", but has also appeared in the Islam where the Islam was represented and expressed as unitary, timeless, and unchanging (Abu-Lughod 2000, 784-785; Osella and Soares 2010, 2).

This construction of (Muslim) women as victims also constructs a male identity as being the victimiser or the perpetrator. This othering between the female victim and the male perpetrator puts in place stereotypical gender images. This is conflicting with reality, since there are also various women participating in violent conflict. McKay and Mazurana (2004) have written about the acknowledgement of the role of women and girls in armed forces in Mozambique, Uganda and Sierra Leone. Women who participate in these groups mostly take on traditional roles, such as cooking and cleaning, which is a replication of their roles within the society of these countries. But the participation of these women in armed forces also opens up new opportunities for them, for example gaining a new status or learning new skills (McKay and Mazurana 2004, 17). There is no denying that the number of women that are involved in violent extremism in Syria is also increasing and is becoming a pressing issue. The number of women perpetrators is growing, as well as women being active supporters and encouragers of violent extremist's acts. In the last thirty years there has been a notable change of the direct engagement of women as suicide bombers, but mostly women having a supporting role as wife and mother, catering for the next generation, especially within religious extremist groups (Carter 2013, 2; Kneip 2016). Various women spoken to for this study have acknowledged the influence they

have on their sons. Especially women who are strongly against the Assad regime have shown support of extremist groups as an alternative to the current regime in Syria. This affects the ideology of their children and even their husbands.[35]

This is an ambiguous role. On the one hand women are seen as victims, and on the other hand women participate themselves in violent conflict, as mother or supporter. Instead of seen as a homogenous group, women must be acknowledged as a heterogeneous group who have multiple interests and are polyvocal.

Women as weapons of war?

Conflict resolution in the past has been acknowledged to be ‘gender-blind’ (Ramsbotham, Miall and Woodhouse 2007, 265). This is because gender is often hidden in human nature and taken-for-granted (Reimann 2002, 1). This gender-blind overlooks the role of women in conflict, and only used to address male fighters and female victims. Since the space of conflict and war is a constructed social practice, conflict resolution needs to take gender perspectives into account. The construction of gender differences in conflict are far more complex than these two stereotypes of men and women. (Ramsbotham, Miall and Woodhouse 2007, 265). Instead of being portrayed as the victim, women need to be made visible as agents of change in peacebuilding and conflict resolution (Ramsbotham, Miall and Woodhouse 2007, 266-267). According to an informant who is active in a women’s organisation in Syria:

> Women are close to violence. They need not to be seen as victims but as part of families, where radical ideas can foster. We need to ask ourselves how to include women in talks about security. We need a shift from victims to actors.[36]

The passing of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security, which was initiated in October 2000, was seen as a historically significant move towards the engendering of conflict resolution. The resolution acknowledges that civilians, and in particularly women and children account for the vast majority of those who are affected by

[35] Information compiled from several interviews conducted with Syrian women in the Netherlands
[36] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 17, 2016.

armed conflict. UNSCR 1325 also recommends that a gender perspective has to be mainstreamed within peacekeeping operations. The resolution makes a call for action for the UN and governments by pleading for the institutionalisation of women's participation in peace talks, and in post-conflict processes of peacebuilding and reconstruction.[37] According to Kofi Annan this resolution was a "landmark step in raising awareness of the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, and of the vital role of women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding" (Ramsbotham, Miall and Woodhouse 2007, 272). Yet working with women in prevention processes is still largely under supported.

The gendered dimension of violent extremism is falling short in policies surrounding Preventing Violent Extremism processes. Although recently the attention to women's roles as both inhibitor and driver of violent extremism has gained more awareness (Kneip 2016, 89), the acknowledgement of the impact of gender on identity roles and the construction of relationships between women and men within communities is lacking. But gender is an important aspect for communities that are dealing with the prevention and countering of violent extremism. Addressing the complexities that come with gender perspectives can help to understand dimensions of violent extremism better and can improve the way in which causes of violent extremism are being addressed. Including women in preventing violent extremism processes is part of a more holistic approach to the understanding of violent extremism and to minimise the input of the military, whilst focusing on community level and the local context.

The ActionAid Report (2015) states that "extremism and radicalism are usually used to oppress women. [Therefore] having more women empowered is hitting one of the pillars that support extremism" (ActionAid Report 2015, 34). Through empowerment a more inclusive system for peacebuilding can be created and local participation for women can be developed. Empowerment is the expansion of freedom of choice and action by people to shape their lives. Gender is seen as a crucial element of empowerment and is also called women's empowerment. Part of women's empowerment is to strengthen the mental confidence of women and creating a sense of self-reliance. These are important indicators to encourage action by individuals (Narayan-Parker 2005, 20). The empowerment of women is, according to the OECD (2012, 80)

[37] Landmark resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/ Visited on April 20, 2016.

necessary to achieve sustainable development, decrease poverty and equality in society. Empowering people who live in poverty or conflict settings and ensuring their rights would contribute to the reduction of poverty and to create development. In order for this to succeed men and women must change existing power relations and influence the processes that stand in the way of improving their livelihood. Greater gender equality is desirable for social and economic tools for poverty reduction (OECD 2012, 20-21). Empowerment from the approach of feminist anthropology is making sure the voices of women are being heard. This polyvocality is important in order to construct an adequate political response to issues concerning these women. The feminist anthropologist Walley (1997) has done research on the practice of, and discourse surrounding, female genital operations. She argues that this concern for voices on the ground is necessary, and questions the sufficiency of feminist and political viewpoints commonly expressed toward female genital operations in Europe and the United States. Searching for the voices of women on the ground is part of the 'authentic' perspective, and shows how women 'really' think about certain practices (Walley 1997, 334).

Women in Preventing Violent Extremism in Syria

In Syria women's groups, as well as a substantive number of individual activists are working on peacebuilding measures. There are a few Syrian women organisations that were founded before the Arab uprisings in 2011, but a significant rise was seen around 2012 where, according to a study of the Syrian Badael organisation, eleven groups were founded in a timespan of just one year (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015, 5). Especially the years of 2013 and 2014 showed a growing curve in the foundation of women's organisations in Syria. Most of the women participating in these organisations are between 31 and 50 years old (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015, 12). Women have started to participate as activists because of various reasons, examples being because they themselves had suffered from inequality based on gender or ethnicity, or oppression by the Assad regime.[38] Women's organisations also have special advantages in Syria, because they are often seen as non-polarising and non-violent and have been instrumental in community policing approaches. Still, the number of women working in civil society organisations remains weak in Syria. Over 61 per cent of the organisations have no

[38] Information compiled from several interviews conducted with Syrian women in the Netherlands

female representation, and this low number of women in civil society organisations is especially low in the countryside. Due to the culture and traditions in these areas creates certain barriers for the participation of women. The women who do participate often have a strong character in order to overcome the views of male-dominated organisations. Most of these women come from families who hold traditions of decades-long political opposition and are born into these types of activism (Khalaf, Ramadan and Stolleis 2014, 21-22).

Strengthening the Syrian civil society that is working on peacebuilding processes is an important part to address the root causes of the conflict. Engaging women in preventing measures for violent extremism is especially useful on the local level, where the root causes appear. According to Elaine Hargrove, Programme Director for the Sisters against Violent Extremism (SAVE) ‘Women are strategically positioned to help raise awareness about the threat of violent extremism and to empower their communities to reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies’.[39] Women can develop knowledge and tools in order to help the protection of their families, their neighbourhoods and the societies against the threat of violent extremism. Women can be seen as actors that have great capacity to raise awareness in communities and to build capacity amongst other women on the local level to address radicalisation. Since one of every four people join violent extremist groups through their friends and one in every five through their families, the direct environment of young boys is especially important in prevention processes (Atran 2016, 198). Youth who go into violent extremism often find themselves in self-seeking transitional stages who are being appealed for a meaningful cause (Atran 2016, 199). Women can convince their sons and daughters who are fighting to lay down their weapons and re-integrate in the community. Women can also be trained to see what the first signs are of radicalism amongst their sons or daughters. This can help to stop the recruitment of children in armed forces including ISIS, which on the longer term will help in reducing violence. According to Fatima Akilu, expert on preventing violent extremism, women can also have a relevant role in assisting victims of terror, participating in negotiations of ceasefires, participating in early warning networks and contributing to peace and security.[40]

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[39] Quote from OSCE Article, OSCE highlights need to involve women in efforts to counter violent extremism, terrorist radicalization. 12 March 2012. http://www.osce.org/atu/88880. Visited on 10 July 2016.

[40] Fatima Akilu (PVE Expert) PowerPoint Presentation (Global meeting on Preventing Violent Extremism, UNDP, March 2016) www.undp.org/content/dam/norway/.../Fatima%20Akilu%20(2).ppt Visited on April 20, 2016

5. On: Facing Barriers in Syria

Sun falling down again.
Bright city lights,
Have burned through their kerosene.
The days are black as the night,
The nights…
You're the last light as it fades to black.
Don't look out your window,
When the mirror is cracked,
Is cracked…

But come now my bride,
Can you take my hand?
Across the divide between us and our homeland.
Away we are carried,
But we both know,
A marriage bed buried under rubble in Aleppo.

'Aleppo' by Alice Limoges[41]

As Syria is in war, air strikes are a common day to day event. Cities are no longer recognisable and the once so beautiful country, no longer is able to show its beautiful nature and culture to the people as it is becoming more and more dangerous to travel there. Despite the need for women activist organisations in the field, there is a growing warning coming from organisations on the ground about the dangers for women activists on the frontline. Not only these bombings make working in cities in Syria increasingly dangerous, but also being an activist increases the threat of being arrested or killed. In this chapter I will describe the growing threats women face when

[41] 'Aleppo'. Song written and produced by Alice Limoges. Released May 6, 2016. According to the source this song was written to mourn what Syrian refugees have to go through, when they are forces to flee after their hometown is being bombed. https://alicelimoges.bandcamp.com/track/aleppo-2

working in or on the frontline. I will specifically look at the challenges in Syria and the consequences of these challenges for women's activism. I will conclude on a positive note by arguing that women overcome these risks with their passionate motivation to fight injustice. The main source of data for this chapter are the stories that Syrian women have shared with me about their experiences in the conflict.

Challenges in the field of Activism

> They face all the violence [that] other women face in diversity, and on top of that, they face the violence of political attacks for the work that they do, not [just] for the causes that they fight for, but also for breaking the gender norms[42]

This is a quote of Lydia Alpízar, executive director of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) about the story of Hend Nafea. Hend Nafea is a young Egyptian human-rights worker, who was sentenced to jail for 25 years for being a women human-rights activist, on which she decided to flee and leave her home country. Unfortunately this is not a unique story.

Women that are fighting on the frontline for their rights and the rights of their communities in countries across the entire world have been a growing trend for generations. These particular women face a bigger threat of gender based violence. This means that not only them, but also family members are possible victims of threats, mockery, verbal abuse and physical and sexual assault, as an effort to undermine and punish women who dare to speak up. This is according to ActionAid (2015) perpetrated by family and community members, criminal groups, religious groups, armed militias and even the government and state actors (ActionAid 2015, 40).

But why are specifically women targeted. According to Tamir (1999) women rarely belong to the powerful groups and decision makers in society. Women who strive to protect their rights are rarely conservative and thus greater targets to be harmed by group rights. This is because group rights serve the interest of those who are powerful and conservative. So when a

[42] Lydia Alpízar, A.W.I.D.'s executive director in "When Women Human-Rights Activists Are in Danger, its Women Who Come to Their Rescue". http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/07/hend-nafea-women-human-rights-activists. Visited on April 12, 2016

person does not agree with certain rights of the group and strives for social transformation, they are perceived as agents of assimilation who betray the group and are seen as a threat. Therefore for the sake of preventing change the taking of extreme measures is being justified (Tamir 1999, 47-49).

According to a survey accompanying the report of ActionAid (2015) on the role of women and girls in violence, 62% of the women's rights activists felt less safe in 2015 than they did two years ago. 56% of the women, who did not notice a decrease in safety, still noted that they experienced cases of harassment or fear of harassment. Most of these threats came, according to the respondents in the survey, from politically motivated groups such as armed militias, 42% came from governments, 35% from religious groups and 12% from the police (ActionAid 2015). One example of a country where violence is used as a tool to silence the voices of women is Afghanistan. This is one of the most extreme examples of a country where women's rights activists are being attacked or murdered (ActionAid 2015, 41). In Egypt female protesters have been structurally harassed by the police as well, in opposition to male protesters. This includes strip-searching, taking of picture of their naked bodies, accusations of prostitution and virginity tests. Also the President of Yemen stated in 2011 that female protesters were breaking the Islamic law because they were not allowed to mix with male protesters (Al-Ali 2012, 29).

Next to being harassed activists on the frontline face an increasing danger of being banned from their country, or are forced to flee in order to save their own lives. Often this means that they are living in exile, which makes it hard to keep working on preventing violent extremism or conflict. According to Ghorashi (2005) these activists, once they are in exile, enter an empty space where they have a sense of non-belonging. "We have no full citizenship. Our passport means nothing," a woman said when telling me about what being a Syrian refugee means to her. The women interviewed for this research all had to flee their country, to escape the threats of bombings or in order to avoid being arrested. Most of the women came by airplane, after their husbands or brothers arrived in this country. They feel they are not being listened to and not being able to share their story, because people here do not know what they have experienced. One woman from the town of Baniyas in Syria, where the Baniyas massacre occurred in 2013, grabbed her mobile phone during our interview wanting to show me all of the

horrific images of the massacre. Scrolling through the images of children lying on the ground with burned faces, piles of dead bodies and men standing in lines with bags over their heads, she said she wanted the people here to know what had happened and that the story of all the dead people in Baniyas is being heard.[43]

Syrian barriers for women on the frontline

In Syria these barriers for activists have been long in place. Even before the Arab Uprisings activists faced dangers of being arrested. When Hafez al-Assad was chosen in 1970 as the new leader of Syria a full police state was established, which came with the monopoly over services and violent repression against people who dared to go against them (Lilli 2016, 185; Bhardwaj 2012, 85). Activists of the communist groups or the Islamic Brotherhood who fought for democracy and against the Assad regime were being warned by Assad, by taking daughters in prison and raping them. [44] Being an activist then meant living in danger and this unfortunately did not change with the nomination of his son in 2000, Bashar al-Assad, as the new Syrian leader (Lilli 2016, 185; Bhardwaj 2012, 85). The Arab Uprisings at first seemed to open up spaces for reform, but Assad responded to the mass demonstrations of 2011 with violence. The violent crackdown of the Assad regime on these peaceful demonstrations with the use of a military approach has ensured a stalemate of violence in Syria.

Now the threat of working as an activist has increased by the outbreak of the war. The current security threat poses implications to all peacebuilding efforts in Syria, since the militarisation of the conflict has resulted in the spread of weapons and since the state is fighting against the increasing power of radical militant groups such as ISIS. Assad together with the international community focuses on combatting ISIS with airstrikes and bombings, instead of troops on the ground and addressing root causes. These bombardments of ISIS strongholds increase the dangers of women working on the frontline. Organisations have to flee to neighbouring countries or overseas to escape these destructions, which makes it more difficult for them to help preventing violent extremism.[45]

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[43] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 17, 2016.
[44] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 17, 2016.
[45] Information compiled from several interviews conducted with Syrian Activists in the Netherlands

Not only the constant bombardment of civilian areas, but the general lack of safety, absence of rule of law, killings and detentions, displacement of millions of people, kidnapping and enforced disappearance, and the economic struggle form a continuous threat to people living in Syria (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015, 31). Another consequence, according to the women in the field, is that bombings lead to anger amongst the Syrian population, which only leads to more indignation amongst youth in Syria and consequently to more violent extremism.

Women's activism in Syria is heavily suffering from a tightly held state patronage and a heavy monitoring for the organisations and activists that operate still somewhat independent from the government (Ghazzawi 2014, 4). Women that work as activists face detention, torture and sexual abuse. The police, that is meant to protect the civilians, is not being trusted in Syria and are linked to Assad supporters. They are known to arrest activists and give them an unfair trial. The five year old daughter of a fugitive activist who lives in the Netherlands still cringes when she sees police, because of the associations she has of them as being corrupted and using violence against people who dare to speak freely.[46] Activists that work in ISIS controlled territory, endure critical observation, and men and women are being separated in these areas, under the '*Sharia* code', or are banned from leaving their house all together.

There is a lack of funding for women's organisations working on preventing violence in Syria, and this has a negative impact on their ability to conduct activities.[47] This is linked to the lack of acknowledgement of Syrian women organisations by the international community, which is due to the fact that many organisations are not officially registered and therefore cannot apply for grants. Activists have also turned down grants themselves, out of suspicion or due to conflicting interests between the donor and the receiving organisation. This lack of funding makes volunteer work necessary, but finding people who are able and willing to spend their own time and money on peace work is difficult. The implementation of project solely based on volunteer work is also often not enough to maintain these projects on the long run due to financial limitations. Aside from the lack of funding, there is also a lack in capacities on peacebuilding missions of the women involved (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015, 5). Receiving training would give these activists specific skills and increase their knowledge on

[46] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 10, 2016.
[47] Information compiled from several interviews conducted with Syrian women in the Netherlands

preventing violent extremism. This could also include a training to women about their rights. Security threats and lack of funding make receiving training also almost impossible. Traveling out of Syria to attend workshops and trainings about peace building is most of the time not tolerated by warring parties (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015, 16).

This lack of acknowledgement of Syrian peace organisations has to do with the lack of knowledge about peace activism. There is a passive attitude towards peacebuilding. This is due to the decades of state dominance, in which citizens lived in political ignorance by being treated as insignificant in political processes. The massive violence of the last decade has also made concepts such as non-violence and peace alien to the people on the frontline. Civil involvement in prevention processes therefore lack understanding and trust and can lead to resistance from within civil society (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015, 32).

In addition to this lack of understanding of peace organisations, male dominance has to be overcome by women's activists in Syria. Patriarchy results in male dominance over decision making and traditional perceptions of women place their role in society elsewhere, such as in domestic duties.

Overcoming barriers

> We are people with lost homes and misplaced ideals, people who experienced both the nearness of death and the highest moments of joy in life, and people who learned to survive. It feels like a miracle to know that people can talk about lost ideals and hopes, and be surrounded by emotions. It is amazing to talk to others without words, using just the movements of our bodies, the tears in our eyes, and the coldness of our hands (Ghorashi 2005, 368-369).

Despite the growing threats and bombardments many organisations and activists have showed perseverance and a commitment in continuing their work. They have adapted and change their strategies in order to cope with the daily realities of war and siege. Although many activists had to seek refuge in nearby countries or elsewhere, they still care for their home country and do what they can to further their work, by participating in national meetings on security in Syria and

doing research on violent extremism.[48] Women who still work in Syria also adjust to the conflict. Because of the war many men have died, and the population of Syria now largely consists of women. These women find themselves having new roles, and she becomes responsible for everything.[49] Example from the past has shown that this new role of women eventually can lead to change, as has happened after World War I in the Netherlands, where women massively replaced the man on the labour market and as a response to this new role was given general right to vote after the war (De Weerdt 1993).

Even small tools such as the burqa are used as a way to overcome barriers on the frontline. A Syrian activist told me that the burqa, largely imposed by ISIS, is used by women as a weapon. The burqa offers them protection when they walk across the streets, since they are not recognised underneath this garment. An activist who normally does not wear a *hijab,* used the burqa to be able to go outside unrecognised and avoid the danger of being arrested. It also is used as a tool to smuggle items.[50] This shows the growing creativity of women to be able to work in an environment that is increasingly restrictive.

The activists in this study all stress the importance of addressing the root causes of the conflict, instead of bombarding extremist groups, especially in preventing measures. They emphasise that local solutions are key sources in order to contribute to national peace. The local level must therefore be linked to the international level. Air strikes and violence only causes more violence. Women told me they are fed up with the violence, and the only way to peace is by using non-violent measures. This means that further prevention of conflict and violence is key in peace making. Women can help in a non-violent manner by making sure violent extremism is prevented. The existing stereotypes that can prevent women from participating in organisations, since they are seen as victims of conflict, can thus be bypassed, and changed into something positive. Although this is a gender stereotype that must be fought against, it can be used as a benefit in conflict, according to some activists. More acceptable for women to get involved in peace initiatives. Non-violent associations of women having no military interests, and are only after safety. Using these stereotypes to bring about peace, can on the long term help women in

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[48] Information compiled from several interviews conducted with Syrian women in the Netherlands
[49] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 10, 2016.
[50] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 10, 2016.

peace initiatives to gradually change these stereotypes. “We need to show the world how we could act in a non-violent way.”[51]

Todays advanced technology can help women to document, and spread knowledge on how to prevent further violent extremism. Women are starting to document in Syria, ranging from how many victims and deaths occurred that day, who has died, who has been arrested. She writes everything down and sends it to the UN or other institutes.[52] Considering the lack of international involvement, these communication technologies can help to reach out to people all over the world, in order to ask for their support and solidarity.

In order to spread knowledge and understanding of the importance of prevention work, campaigns, trainings and workshops must be offered to the civil society in Syria. Once citizens, and especially women, realise they have agency and are able to rebuild their country on the pillars of equality, they will themselves become advocates of activism. An activists working on the increasing of voices of women said: “When we narrate, write, report, we tell a story of experience. We have lived in the conflict and it has to spread to the international world.”[53]

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[51] Interview with a member of a Syrian Peace organisation, April 12, 2016.
[52] Interview with a Syrian Activist, July 10, 2016.
[53] Interview with a member of a Syrian Peace organisation, April 12, 2016.

6. On: Rebuilding the Future of Syria

Conclusion

Increased sexual violence and discrimination has had a severe impact on women in the ongoing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic (OECD 2014, 1). The conflict that has escalated since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 has shown a growing curve in the uprising of violent extremism. The threat of violence against women in Syria has grown alongside this curve. Despite these security threats, women's activism has continuously proven to be important in peace processes, and should also play a role in the prevention of violent extremism. This study has shown how women need to be engaged in activism as actors. Even though they have to work with grave circumstances on the frontline, this study has shown that women can find creative solutions to remain active as activists. In this thesis I have shown the ambiguous role of women participating as activists in peace processes. On the one hand, a shift is necessary from women as victims to actors in peace processes, but on the other hand real life has shown that this role is becoming increasingly dangerous. Through the lens of feminist anthropology I have given women in this study a voice about this problematic. This concern of voices on and from the frontline is necessary in order to know what is 'really' happening on the ground (Walley 1997, 334).

I will start this conclusion by give an overview of the main findings that are discussed in this thesis. Following, I will give an answer to the central question that was posed in this study. In the last paragraph I will present future recommendations for policies based on the outcomes of this thesis. The central question that was examined in this thesis is:

> What are the benefits and implications of women and women's organisations participating in processes of preventing violent extremism in the Syrian Arab Republic?

This thesis has provided an examination of the role of women in preventing violent extremism in a country that is heavily divided by conflict, by examining the policy field around violent extremism, combined with ethnographic material. Through the study of violent extremism in

Syria I have added empirical evidence to show the importance of the contribution of the role of women in preventing violent extremism in Syria.

The war in Syria is constantly under debate. Following the Arab Spring has been a response of massive violence by the Assad regime, and the uprising of violent extremist groups such as ISIS (Bhardwaj 2012, 84; Drakaki 2016, 289). This has triggered debate about the nature of the Syrian war and depending on political and ideological agendas, this conflict has been recognised as a civil war, insurgency and revolution (Bhardwaj 2012; Carpi 2013; Milton-Edwards and Hinchcliffe 2001; Noor and Hyp 2016). This lack of a clear framework of the Syrian war has to do with the lack of a clear definition of Violent Extremism by institutions and governments working on combatting violent extremism. This lack of definition holds a danger of interpretation and can result in a broad range of different measures, which are used against acts that might be qualified by them as extremist acts, while other definitions classify them differently (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). This can be seen in Syria as well. International involvement from the U.S. and Russia has started when ISIS arrived on the scene. They are classified as a violent extremist group, who conducts extremist acts against the population and form an international threat, but number of death casualties and the women in this study have continuously proven that the Assad regime holds more violent acts on its name.[54] This also arises a question about the measures being taken against violent extremism. Efforts are mainly top-down and involve bombings, isolation of extremists. Peace negotiations and security talks often lacks the involvement of local organisations, while the involvement of the local level can help to anticipate and avoid consequences that can trigger violent extremism (Hampson and Malone 2002, 6).This problematic has also caused greater attention towards the role of women in preventing measures.

Consequences of conflict often come at the expense of sexual violence against women, of which rape is the most common form of sexual violence (Noor and Hyp 2016, 735). Gender conservative Violent Extremist groups are likely to victimise women and target them with acts of violence, including rape (Carter 2013, 2; Schnabel and Tabyshalieva 2012, 13). This sexual violence against women puts women in conflict within the 'victim' narrative, which

[54] Syrian Network for Human Rights 'A comparison between the death casualties who were killed by the Syrian regime and ISIL during 2015 according to SNHR archives.' http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/01/02/16116/ Visited on June 20, 2016.

acknowledges that they have suffered and are in need of help. The 'victim' narrative constrains women as being powerless and weak, in need of an outsider to help her take action against the victimiser (Leisenring 2006, 307). This marginalises women and underutilises their potential. In Syria women's participation in prevention processes remains low, while women's organisations have advantages as being no-violent and having a community policing approach. Especially in the prevention of violent extremism women can have a significant role. Since violent extremism is often used to oppress women, empowering women would mean hitting one of the pillars of violent extremism (ActionAid Report 2015, 34). In Syria the woman is seen as an important household member and her position is based upon family ties. This means that women have a role in the development of extremism amongst sons and husbands, but can also help women to develop tools for early warning systems in their family and can help stop the fostering for violent extremism (Alsaba and Kapilashrami 2016). This shows the ambiguous role of women, where women are not only victims of violence, but also have an important role in the community and household. This differs from the 'sameness' Moore (1988, 11) has implied in the earlier days of feminist anthropology, but shows that women are not only victims but can, next to victims, be perpetrators but also active actors in conflict and conflict prevention. This shows the concern for a polyvocal attitude towards conflict prevention and multiple voices on the ground.

What must not be overlooked is the growing danger for women working on the frontline and the challenges they face on a daily basis. Women who work as activists on the frontline often face threats, mockery, verbal abuse and physical and sexual assault (ActionAid 2015, 40). In Syria the bombings of Assad and the international community have posed an extra threat to women in the field. Activists and women's organisations have to flee to neighbouring countries or to Europe in order to escape these threats, which makes working on the ground nearly impossible. Despite these threats women have showed perseverance and a commitment in continuing their work. Women adjust to the conflict and find themselves in new roles. This offers hope and perspective for future involvement of women in preventing violent extremism. Concluding it can be said that women hold a vital role as actors in prevention of violent extremism. This is due to their bottom-up approach and deep understanding of the local context. The women from Syria know the root causes to the conflict, and empowering them will help them prevent further violent extremism, through their families and communities.

Recommendations

This thesis has shown the potential women can have in preventing violent extremism in Syria. In order to make sure women are included in future prevention processes, policies and action plans need to be adjusted in order to be inclusive. In order to adjust prevention and peace processes in an inclusive manner to a specific conflict, conflict should be analysed by both using a feminist and gender perspective. These perspectives should also be incorporated in the development and implementation of programs and policies about prevention processes in conflict. It is necessary that the local level is included in these processes to know what they really need and expect from the international community. Institutions and international governments should work together with the local level to improve the status of women and girls in conflict, as an integral aspect and basis for further peace processes. In order for this to succeed, policies that violence against girls and women has a key role in the creation of an insecure environment and inequality in societies. At the same time there must be acknowledged that women are not only victims of this type of violence, but that they can have a vital role in combatting sexual violence by addressing root causes of violence. Organisations must work on the integration and inclusion of women in prevention processes. Therefore, programs and policies that work on the prevention of violent extremism must address this feminist concern and promote and fund inclusion of women.

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Glossary of terms

AQI	- Al Qaida in Iraq
Bayat	- A formal Oath of Allegiance to an emir. The practice is named in the Qur'an in Surah 48:10: "Verily, those who give thee their allegiance, they give it but to Allah Himself"
Caliph	- A person who is the leader to the Muslim community and is seen as the religious successor to the Islamic prophet, Muhammad
CVE	- Countering Violent Extremism
Hijab	- Literally meaning 'screen', this can refer to physical coverings used by Muslim women or, more generally, a given standard of modesty.
Hudud	- Literally meaning 'limit' or 'restriction'. Punishments reserved for perceived 'crimes against religion', including adultery, stealing, apostasy and homosexuality
HVE	- Home grown Violent Extremism
IDP	- Internally Displaced People
IS	- Islamic State
ISIS	- the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
Jihad	- literally translates as 'to struggle', but is often used to refer to armed struggle.
Jilbab	- Full-length long-sleeved garment worn by some Muslim women.
Khilafa	- Caliphate, or Muslim empire governed by Sharia
MENA	- Middle East and North Africa
PVE	- Preventing Violent Extremism
Sharia	- The moral code and religious law within Islam, based on an understanding derived from the Islamic scriptures, according to the opinion of the one making the interpretation.
UN	- United Nations
UNSCR	- United Nations Security Council Resolution
USAID	- United States Agency for International Development
VE	- Violent Extremism