

## Special Issue - Call for Papers

### Women, Leadership and Armed Groups in Africa and the Middle East

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A considerable number of countries in Africa and the Middle East have experienced several decades of political instability and to this day, the fragility of state structures is a clear demonstration of such instability. In addition, environmental and, crucially, economic crises have had a negative impact on the capacity of states in both regions to fully control their territory, as vast swathes of it have been either contested or controlled by a number of heterogeneous armed groups. If anything, the number of rebel groups, state-sponsored militias, terrorist networks, self-defense patrols and secessionist movements has grown exponentially.

Such groups have been set up to answer different needs and respond to different challenges. In some instances, the state itself has created armed groups – proximity to the state - to support its own activities and extend its sovereignty, ensuring a degree of territorial control (Algeria in the 1990s, Syria in the 2010s and Burkina Faso more recently). In other cases, individuals or groups set them up to defend the interests of specific ethnic, social, or religious communities – substitution to the state – against threats the state cannot or will not face (Centrafrican Republic, Lybia, Somalia and Mali). In other instances still, structured groups with a clear ideological, political and socio-economic agenda create armed groups in opposition to the state (ISIS, Boko Haram). The heterogeneity of armed groups highlights the porosity between militias, insurgents, paramilitary groups, the conflictual or symbiotic relationship between armed groups and the state, and their role in specific wars (Iraq, Syria or Nigeria).

In such contexts, the use of violence and coercion have significant consequences for women. In the literature, women are often represented and studied as victims, *camp followers* (doing laundry, tailoring, nursing, cooking) and *combat wives* forced to become combatants' spouses, mistresses or sex slaves, whereas men are assumed to be full actors with agency and autonomy. Several other authors though suggest that women are participants in acts of violence for three reasons. First, there is the necessity to defend family members. Second, there is the fight against poverty and the struggle to ensure the survival of the community against abuses. Third, there is the intention to provide material support to male combatants.

There are very few analyses placing women centre stage in decision-making about violence whether directly – engagement in military operations – or indirectly – commanding others to perpetrate violence. In short, womens' full agency is, with some notable exceptions, often discounted in the litterature, although the development of quantitative studies has allowed scholarship to provide empirical evidence of the participation of women as active perpetrators of violence and the motivations behind it beyond individual case-studies.

Quantitative studies are useful in providing a broad picture of the trends and tendencies that exist within a specific political and social phenomenon such as the presence of women in armed groups and their type of participation, but what are the exact mechanisms that lead them to be main decision-makers?

This special issue focuses on an under-researched aspect of the rise of militias and defense groups, namely the role of women in leadership positions in such organisations and groups, paying special attention on Africa and the Middle East to measure the empirical variation between different terrains of inquiry to be analysed through two different theoretical frameworks: the Gendered Theory of Rebellion – the political, economic, ethno-religious and human security motivations – and the Domination/Power Theory – through the profiles of women leaders. The rationale for the special issue is the attempt to analyse and evaluate the experience of women in leadership positions, their motivations for violence and the degree to which their decision-making and influence in the perpetration of violence impacts their definition of femininity.

Thus, the research questions guiding in the special issue are: How and in which countries did they become leaders? What actions do they carry out and are they part of different logics compared to those carried out by men? Given their personal trajectories, their motivations and their actions, what specific relationships can be established between women in positions of leadership and the use of violence? Do the leadership status of these women and their relationship to violence lead us to revisit the agency of women to the point of talking about empowerment through violence? How can their leadership, beyond gender norms, renegotiate the norms of femininity?

**Paper proposals (max. 500 words) should be submitted to both editors at:**  
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**Deadline for the submission of the proposals: November 15 2024.**