


## [Whetstone on Cook, 'A Woman's Place: US Counterterrorism since 9/11'](#)

Review published on Wednesday, February 8, 2023

**Joana Cook.** *A Woman's Place: US Counterterrorism since 9/11*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xvi + 564 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-19-750655-4](#). 

**Reviewed by** Crystal Whetstone (Sam Houston State) **Published on** H-War (February, 2023)  
**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

**Printable Version:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57781>

This massive tome aims “to examine how, where and why women have become visible in the discourses and practices related to counterterrorism” from 2001 to 2019 (p. 1). Cook documents shifting understandings of women’s roles in counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, countering violent extremism, and terrorism since 9/11 from a US government perspective. Early views of women evolved from victims requiring (male) protection (including US servicewomen) to the effectiveness of US servicewomen in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, and the agency and effectiveness of foreign women in national security forces, their families and communities, and terrorism.

Over seven chapters, Cook presents a straightforward research design that follows a qualitative methodology with three empirical chapters on respective case studies of the US Department of Defense, US Department of State, and US Agency for International Development (USAID). The main method is the discourse analysis of five hundred-plus policy and strategy documents from the three US presidential administrations and al-Qaeda and ISIS, as well as forty-plus interviews of elite practitioners, including diplomats, members of the US and UK governments, academics, security officials, and nongovernmental workers. Cook starts by reviewing the research on women in counterterrorism (introduction and chapter 1) and background on US counterterrorism under the Bush and Obama administrations (chapter 2). The empirical chapters (chapters 3-5) document the evolution of women’s visibility in counterterrorism and related areas in the Bush and Obama administrations, examining the coordination (and lack thereof) among the Department of Defense, Department of State, and USAID and highlighting similarities and differences between the two administrations concerning US efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen (and later, Syria). The final chapter (chapter 6) ends with counterterrorism under the Trump administration until 2019.

The strengths of this study are its thoroughness and broad scope. For those unfamiliar with security studies, Cook’s overview of counterterrorism is comprehensive and clear, meaning that this study will be of use to those outside international relations (IR) and related fields. Likewise, for those unfamiliar with gender studies, Cook offers a solid summary of gender and counterterrorism-related research. The assessment of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325), which promotes (among other aims) women’s participation in security matters, and an overview of feminist security studies lay the groundwork for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 by the US and women in counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and countering violent

extremism.

Two theoretically interesting findings are, first, that UNSCR 1325's implementation at the national level in the realm of policy does not automatically "trickle down" to operations and projects on the ground. When major figures in the federal bureaucracy take an interest in UNSCR 1325, there is an impact, as seen in the Obama administration's Department of State and USAID. The Department of Defense was least interested in seeing UNSCR 1325 measures incorporated into operations because its integration was not explicated as part of mission objectives by higher-ups. Second is the immediacy of the conundrum of how best to promote women's interests in counterterrorism, which is rooted in the theoretical debate on the instrumentalization of women's rights. Should promoting women's rights (such as women in security forces and women's economic development) be justified by pointing to the connections between US servicewomen's abilities to present the US military in a softer light and in foreign women's abilities in countering violent extremism in their families and communities? This was most pertinent for USAID, which focuses on development. An instrumentalist approach suggests that once "stability" is achieved, funding for women's rights will dry up given that its purpose is to foster US national security, not women's rights. This is particularly relevant as state conflict has returned to the fore of international affairs and counterterrorism has fallen off the list of US national security priorities, first under the Trump administration and now under the Biden administration, a situation likely to remain given Russia's intervention into Ukraine and escalating US/Western tensions with China.

The weaknesses of the book are minimal. This study was a mammoth undertaking; given that, its straightforward presentation makes sense. Further, some might prefer deeper theoretical insights and the addition of fieldwork. Overall, the strengths outweigh any weaknesses, and the book makes contributions to US counterterrorism (especially that national security cannot be rendered strictly as military operations), to UNSCR 1325 (such as the need to mainstream its aims into all aspects of government, not simply national policy documents and to effectively coordinate among all parts of state bureaucracy), and feminist and gender scholarship. In terms of the latter, Cook's contribution to documenting the dawning realization of US (and other) policy and security experts and practitioners that women are not a homogenous category is most important. From defining women in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria as victims, the US has since trained women in the region in security forces and influenced women to persuade their families and members of their communities to avoid violent extremism. Yet while US servicewomen are thought to "soften" the image of the US military, now tasked with humanitarian aims to address counterinsurgency and countering violent extremism aims, and foreign women are hoped to "stabilize" their communities, some women both in the region and from the West have been drawn to committing acts of terror and/or supporting terrorist groups, most notably ISIS. The broadest takeaway is that women matter in counterterrorism and related areas, but women are too diverse to talk about in generalities.

**Citation:** Crystal Whetstone. Review of Cook, Joana, *A Woman's Place: US Counterterrorism since 9/11*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2023. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57781>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).