



Analysis of Women's Testimonies after the fall of Daesh Caliphate: A Gender Perspective

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The extrapolation of Arabic studies and research that examine the return of Jihadists yields the observation that the issue of the return of women, minor girls and children has been overlooked and not given the attention it deserves by researchers and that this issue has not encouraged them to conduct further investigations and analyses. The lack of attention or interest may be attributable to the fact that the number of female elements directly involved in extremism, such as women in leadership positions, wives of warlords, or indirectly, such as wives or misled minors, are few compared to men, in addition to the fact that women in terror groups mostly were not assigned to combat roles.

On the other hand, contrary to this stance of not subjecting women segment to investigation, there is a great deal of attention in Arab media outlets given to what is happening in the camps, reporting on the lives of those stranded there or the testimonies of those who returned to their countries of origin. The particular attention given by reporters to the topic of Daesh women can be attributed to their perception that their extremism arouses bewilderment, curiosity and excitement, expanding their readership and making profits. Yet, one can ask, what are the motives behind the interest of some researchers in this subject?

Knowledge Gap

When we look closer into the research body produced in the West, starting from 2017, we can notice that many publications have been written on the testimonies of women being stranded in camps, imprisoned or those wanting to return to their countries of origin. Such studies have analyzed the testimonies through varied sociological, psychiatric, gender or anthropological approaches. These studies had a positive impact in producing a good deal of knowledge that helps in categorizing women

involved in terrorism, and understanding their motivations in joining the so-called Caliphate while carrying out tasks not typically assigned to women. Such efforts help in evaluating the previous studies that have analyzed the reasons behind women joining violent extremist organizations, their duties, etc.

The comparison between the broad body of research conducted by Western research centers, based on gender concerning terrorism, and the academic research in the Arab world in this methodology framework, shows the dearth of research in Arabic in this area. Therefore, I feel there is a need to examine the testimonies of this group of young girls and women after the fall of ISIS and dig deeper into their opinions and positions that were expressed in their statements. And although such testimonies raise methodological questions at the credibility level, yet they help us in understanding the types and forms of the presence of women inside the militant groups.

Diverse and varied testimonies

By examining the testimonies, interviews and videos, we can group the female jihadists into two categories:

Group One: consists of women who are willing to leave Daesh, cut ties with it, break dogmatic molds they have been subjected to and return to the countries of origin. The majority of this group claim that they have been misled, tricked into a presumed great human mission or forced to accompany their husbands and relatives and they realized, after having first-hand experience in the Caliphate, the enormity of the mistake they made.

For instance, Khadujah, from Tunisia, who escaped from the city of Raqqa says: "I made a mistake by deciding to join this organization. In fact, I took an emotional decision. I discovered a bunch of people who so easily accuse everyone who opposes them as a disbeliever and murder him/her."

The statements of the majority of the escapees, who ran away prior to the fall of the Caliphate, prove that they were determined to disengage from the past, erase the memory charged with violent extremism and repent the harm they have done to themselves. This category contributed in exposing the discriminatory treatment of women, methods of torturing Yazidi girls and women, the rampant rape, blackmail in women's prisons, in general, and the

wider picture of commercial commodity-mentality in the treatment of the harem community, such as hairstyling, ornaments, selling of clothes, cigarettes, in addition to other information that reveal the confusion at the level of organizations, functions, tasks and outcomes and help us understand the type of relationships centered on exploitation and advantage, despite being cloaked in a religious veneer.

Arab female members of this group plead with their tribes in Syria and Iraq to lend them a helping hand, so they could be able to return back and get reintegrated in their original communities. On the other hand, foreign female fighters ask their home countries such as France, Germany, UK and others to facilitate their return back home and that they stand ready to be held to account, face penalties, receive psychological counseling and get psychological, social and economic support, while others remained hesitant to express their wishes. It is clear that those who made the most of the mediation of the tribes were the Syrian mothers and widows who were responsible for supporting their children. This proves that there are distinct differences between married, single and widowed women, on the one hand, while showing a hierarchy between Arab and foreign women who came from Maghreb countries, on the other hand.

Group Two: represents a category of women who believes in Daesh ideology and are convinced that the Caliphate is here to stay and will expand, therefore they refuse to return to countries that mean nothing for them. They are eager to portray Daesh in a rosy picture and frame their identity in this light. Thus, they do not hesitate to identify with Daesh when introducing themselves and take pride in their experiences and what they had achieved.

An example for that is the statement made by Mrs. Shamima Begum, the British born Daesh member, when she said: “I do not regret joining Daesh.” Likewise, another Tunisian female Daesh member in Al-Hawal camp said: “We are Daesh, we had lived years in justice and peace, the best of life. It is actually an Islamic State that follows the Prophetic lifestyle, however, lately, spies infiltrated our organization and they were the one who blew up ISIS and burned it down.”

Thus, some women in Daesh ranks attributed the retreat of ISIS to an external conspiracy. They divide the world into a dichotomy of the Land of Faith and the Land of Disbelief. And since these women had left the land of

“disbelief” from their point of view, they refuse to return to the camp of “disbelief”, and refuse, once again, to re-live in it.

For instance, a Tunisian woman said about her motives for leaving her country: “They denied us wearing a niqab, study at a university”. Another European woman from al-Baghouz Camp in Syria said: “I do not want to go back to Belgium”. Another Iraqi woman said: (“no glory but in jihad and no glory but in Islam”), yet, her perception of Islam and jihad is that of Daesh. And some female Daesh members even consider the journalists interviewing them as unbelievers for their immodesty and loyalty to their Western governments. They justify their stances with a twisted understanding of some Quranic verses or some events in Islamic history.

Moreover, Daesh female members go even a step further by bragging about their convictions where some extremists continue to carry out Hisbah (enjoining good and forbidding wrong) duties in camps, prisons, penalize those whom they deem less committed to the jihadist ideology, as well as using intimidation and threats. They are also very keen to train their children for jihad, teach them their duties towards the (State of Islamic Sharia) remind the new generation to carry on the acceptance of obligation (Trust) and the completion of the Caliphate project.

This proves the ability of women to use violence against those who do not adhere to the approach of the Islamic State, after being guided by their leaders to true Islam, from their point of view. So, those who carry out such duties isolate some of them and setup a special section for themselves to avoid the spread of “camps warfare”.

Further, within these two aforementioned groups, there is a cohort that chose to adapt to the situation in a pragmatic manner by not revealing their true intentions, abandoned niqab and lay in waiting for the balance of power to change.

Post Caliphate:

The testimonies and statements of female Daesh members, after the fall of the (Caliphate), do not reveal only their convictions, future projects and conceptualizations, but it can be a very rich material to analyze the structure of social relationships, spouse and familial ties, mothers’ ties to their children and their relations with other women. So, by going back to the

testimonies, we could notice that there is discrimination in the treatment, behavior and privileges between the Syrians, Iraqis, on the one hand, and those who came from other Arab, European or Asian countries, on the other hand. So for instance, the Syrian and Iraqi women can go out for shopping and have mobile phones, while the rest can't keep in touch with the rest of their family members and relatives, hence creating a sense of oppression and resentment against those who enjoy such privileges.

Such discrimination in ISIS was based on the degree of the close ties to the top leaders. So the wives of the top commanders enjoyed high status that gave them a sense of superiority toward other women, while the majority of women got treated based on their tasks and duties (Hisbah enforcers, guards, border checkpoint staffers, teachers, nurses) and based on their age and loyalty to the jihadist ideology.

There is also another difference that can be easily noticed in how women react to cameras and respond to both male and female reporters. So, based on the testimonies, we noticed that a number of Tunisian women were willing to come forward and appear in media reports. Apparently, they did so because they wanted to convey their voices back to their families and to the Tunisian government. Or perhaps that was part of some type of resistance and defiance to a (secular) regime that does not abide by Islamic Sharia, in their eyes, even after the political transformation that took place since 2011. This means that women are still carrying out their tasks in asserting the (Caliphate) project and attract masses of people through all available media events.

Another aspect that worth studying is the ties between mothers and their children, given the fact that such relation are atypical. For instance, most Daesh women have children from parents of different nationalities and they feel pride in the motherhood experience that allowed them to promote Islam by having a lot of children who do not belong to a "nation state" that runs counter to Islamic Sharia. They even regard them as children of Islamic community that enforces Islamic Sharia in its entirety and believes only in the concept of separation between unbelievers and Muslims.

Finally, despite the methodological issues of the documented material, yet this sample of testimonies, in our opinion, should be taken into account when laying out future policies, rehabilitation, reintegration programs and

reflect on the phenomenon of girls and women joining militant groups that are only interested in intimidation, murder and bloodshed.