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Female ‘Fighters of Islamic State: Why More from the West?’

By Sara Mahmood

Synopsis

The self-styled Islamic State’s (IS) conception of a caliphate, which accords women a significant role in building and sustaining a state, has mobilised a large number of female supporters and sympathisers to Iraq and Syria from the West. Why is this so?

Commentary

IN THE last few years there has been an unprecedented flow of Islamist foreign fighters to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. A significant portion of these supporters, sympathisers and fighters of the self-styled Islamic State comprises women. Around 3,000 individuals, including 550 women, have travelled to conflict zones from the West. No jihadist conflict in the past has seen such a large mobilisation of women. Women from the West in particular, who used to stay away from such conflicts, have been particularly involved.

The unparalleled flow of female fighters joining the ranks of IS gives rise to two questions: Firstly, why do females have a bigger role in the IS jihad model; and secondly, what are the factors that have mobilised large numbers of female from the Western countries? Two variables in this scenario are worth considering: demand factors and the broader appeal of the so-called caliphate.

The demand for ‘jihadi brides’ and ‘jihadists’

Unlike other Islamist terrorist organisations, it is evident from IS propaganda literature that this jihadist group espouses a long-term vision of the future - to establish a state. Since, the ideology of the group is grounded in territory it also thinks like a social movement in which women are an integral part. IS strategically defines its policies to ensure survival in the distant future. Within IS, there is a well-defined structure in which two roles have been granted to women: the primary roles and secondary roles.

The first manifestation of the *primary role* is women as ‘jihadi brides’ or the foundation of a family. Marrying women to the jihadists will ensure that the lineage of the Muslims fighting to create the ultimate caliphate persists. Helping the foreign fighters set up families in Iraq or Syria will also prevent them from returning to their home countries. IS understands that a state cannot persevere without the

future generation and has also offered families remuneration for bearing children. This means of incentivising relates back to the crucial role of women in ensuring the strength of the caliphate through procreation.

The second instance of the *primary role* is the woman as a mother, whose responsibility is to educate and raise her children to become future jihadists. In this case, the woman is to play a critical role in ideologising the future generation. Thus, her role does not diminish once she gives birth to the future jihadists. Instead it becomes equally crucial in inculcating the values that reinforce the desire to establish and maintain the so-called Islamic Caliphate.

In terms of the secondary role, IS grants women permission to abandon their domestic roles to wage jihad if there are not enough men to protect the caliphate. Within their secondary functions, IS also directs women to gain education and work for the welfare of the society as doctors and teachers for other women. Presently, women are fighting in the frontlines for the Al-Khansaa Brigade, the IS female fighters wing. The Al-Khansaa Brigade is also operating as a police squad that maintains law and order, which includes ensuring that women are properly dressed and do not deviate from acceptable Islamic norms.

Appeal of the self-proclaimed Caliphate

The largest number of female recruits originates from France and Britain, with 63 and 50 girls travelling to Iraq and Syria respectively, since mid-2014. The themes of respect and revenge are central to the appeal for women to join IS in Iraq and Syria.

The young girls joining IS are essentially seeking respect. With the rise of Islamophobia in Europe, countries such as France and Britain are experiencing an increase in hate speech and vigilante attacks against women wearing the hijab (head covering). Most Western Muslims view such incidences as reinforcing their status as second class citizens. Thus, IS' attraction stems from the absence of Islamophobia and the ability to practise religion without any discrimination which is central to self-respect and freedom of religion.

Women who join IS see their action as a means of seeking revenge against the system that has alienated them. This form of revenge does not relate to developing an offensive towards the system, but to attain protection from the life of second class struggle by challenging the authority. Leaving their home countries in the West to join the struggle for the caliphate is symbolically elevating their status in their home countries.

IS advocating a participatory role for women?

While IS is a patriarchal organisation and gives comparatively more importance to the men, it does not deny the critical role of women in a state as well. Women contribute to the longevity of the movement through bearing children that are the future generation, and through the retention of foreign fighters by providing them a stable family life.

However, it is pertinent to understand that IS allowing women to participate in combat and giving them broader functions in the society does not imply that the women possess agency and freedom. One should not associate the more visible role of women with IS as suggesting men and women to be of equal footing.

Instead, for the IS strategic thinkers, the resilience of the caliphate supersedes other considerations. This establishes the core reason for the more visible functions assigned to women, which are attributed to nothing more than the survival of the state that requires participation by both genders alike.

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