"There are no Widows in the Caliphate"

This saying was fairly popular inside Daesh (or ISIL, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), a terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation that was active in the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR) and Iraq. This meant that former wives of fallen fighters automatically remarried their partners in crime.

After the military defeat of Daesh and its affiliated groups, nowadays, Middle Eastern media outlets have been writing about such phenomena in articles dedicated to the so called ‘daishias’. This term is translated from Arabic as a ‘Daesh woman’.

ISIL women include anyone who in one way or other became party to the bloody events of recent years, which were initiated by jihadi fighters in Syria, Iraq and other locations. They are wives, cohabitants, followers and, at times, accomplices of combatants who were involved in various activities, including military ones. In reality, it is difficult to accurately assess their numbers.

According to data from an Arab newspaper 1,735 marriages between Syrian women and foreign fighters were recorded just within the period from 2013 to 2014. And more than 1,100 children were born from such unions. Such statistics are not only relevant to Daesh, but to the whole range of terrorist organizations. A proportion of these women married combatants voluntarily, while others were forced to do so. Some were widowed and left with children, whose fathers’ identities remain unknown, as most fighters concealed their real names and used invented ones. Others became hostages to the war, after their husbands either died or went missing, they were, as a rule, married off to jihadists who were still alive.
Some women ran away from their husbands, who the leaders sent to bloody battle fields to fight against government forces. Other women were forced to move from one place to another as the territory controlled by Daesh and the affiliated groups became smaller and smaller.

There are quite a few foreigners among them. According to data provided by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Iraq, approximately 1,500 women of foreign origins were in prisons there in February 2019.

As for the number of such women in Daesh organizations in Syria and Iraq, the statistics are as follows: 35% of them are from East Asian nations, 23% - from Eastern Europe, 17% - from Western countries and 17 % - from Central Asia.

In the town of Al-Hawl in North-East Syria, a territory controlled by Kurdish forces, there is a refugee camp with at least 75,000 migrants and refugees from the regions that terrorists were expelled from. The air there is abuzz with sounds of different languages produced mainly by women and children, who come from dozens of countries and also include females categorized as ‘daishias’.

A journalist became acquainted with one of them, a Lebanese girl who married a fighter when she was 12 years old. She was then sent to Syria where her husband was killed. Her friend from Turkmenistan married a Daesh combatant too. She was subsequently widowed and became a wife of a ‘fellow soldier’. During a retreat, she was wounded and is now lying in a hospital of that camp.

Her neighbor in the ward is a Ukrainian whose name is Yekaterina. Her jihadi husband perished during the battle for the town of Baghouz in SAR.

Many people who have lost track of their female relatives in Syria, Iraq and other Arab nations are currently trying to find them and free them from imprisonment or from the ‘state of ignorance’. Several such victims have already returned to Lebanon. However, there is still an ongoing search for more than 50 Lebanese women. After the defeat of ISIL, some interested individuals held such women back in various locations, in order to profit from their return home. Their ‘levy’ for illegally transporting these clients to their families ranges from $3,000 to 5,000.

Facts indicate that most of these women fell victim to the environment of lawlessness created by fighters, or at times, to desperate circumstances, when they were left without means of survival among chaos and anarchy. Women were also seduced and became ‘jihadi brides’ online. They were drawn into the Daesh network with generous promises and deluded by extremist ideas.

However, there are also women who willfully cooperated with these terrorist groups in this environment. According to information from Lebanese and British media outlets, there are 6 such known ‘daishias’. The reports do not include their names, instead nicknames are used to refer to them.

There are two British twins, of Somalian origin, who married combatants and declared their desire to fight until their dying breath for this group.

There is also a Saudi woman and a Tunisian, whose jihadi husband accompanied her to Syria, among the six women. The latter was in charge of a military unit comprising 60 female fighters, who wore black scarves that covered their faces. These women received a salary equivalent to $200 a month. This combatant unit was based in the region of Raqqa, a Syrian city.

Middle Eastern outlets are engaged in a discussion about who ought to be considered a ‘daishia’, and about their rights and future. Issues, which include rehabilitating these women and children; repatriating foreign females, and battling those who wish to use their humanitarian plight to justify the ideology of defeated Daesh and its resurgence, have been raised.

There are references to video footage from the summer of this year, which was shown to depict a teenager in the Al-Hawl camp brandishing an ISIL flag. Women displayed signs in English urging mujahideen to seek revenge against Western countries for their participation in the war against jihadi fighters.

In June 2019, the Central Criminal Court of Iraq sentenced two female Daesh members (from Kyrgyzstan) to 15 years of prison for their involvement in terrorist activities, in accordance with local legislature. The women admitted that they had come to Syria with their husbands from Turkey. They then entered Iraq illegally and joined Daesh forces as mercenaries in the city called Tal Afar in the North of the country.

According to data provided by Iraqi authorities, there were more than 1,000 Daesh children, ranging in age from 1 to 16, in their correctional facilities in June of this year. Investigations were initiated into the roles these children’s
parents played in Daesh, and the extent of their responsibility for any terrorist activities.

The Iraqi court system has been communicating with foreign embassies, with the view of transferring the detained children into their care and then repatriating them home with their foreign mothers at the end of the investigation.

Although Daesh was defeated militarily, combatting its still existing ideology and the appeal of its moral and ethical principles remains a current challenge, clearly exemplified by the problem of these ‘daishias’. A number of local political scientists have called it a “ticking time bomb“, which may just ‘explode’ not only in Iraq but in other countries given time.

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