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Unveiling the Role of Women in Jihadist Groups

On July 21, two back-to-back terror attacks rocked Dera Ismail Khan in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The first was carried out by two unidentified gunmen, who opened fire at a checkpoint at Kotla Saidan, killing two policemen. Soon after, a suicide bomber struck a hospital to which the victims of the Kotla Saidan attack were rushed. According to local officials, the suicide bomber was a 28-year-old burqa-clad woman. She was reportedly strapped with 7-8 kilograms of explosives packed with nails and ball-bearings, which she detonated near a crowd of people who were bringing in the injured and dead to an ambulance. The suicide bombing resulted in the death of four policemen and three civilians visiting relatives at the hospital. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is opposed to the Pakistani state and is based largely in areas along the Afghan-Pakistani border, claimed responsibility for the attack, describing it as revenge for the killing of two TTP commanders by police a month earlier. However, it denied that the suicide bomber was a woman (The Nation (https://nation.com.pk/22-Jul-2019/nine-martyred-in-twin-terror-attacks-in-di-khan) , July 22).

Women have played a significant role in South Asia’s many militant organizations. In addition to political work, women—who comprised a third of the fighting forces of Maoist groups in India and Nepal—engaged in combat. A few were in senior positions in these organizations. This was the case with the Tamil nationalist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, as well. Indeed, the LTTE had a distinct women’s wing called the Suthanthira Paravaigal (Freedom Birds). Female fighters of the LTTE not only participated in pitched battles with the Sri Lankan armed forces, but also carried out several major suicide attacks. [1]

In contrast to these organizations, Islamist and jihadist groups in the region are widely perceived to have avoided recruiting women, especially as combatants. This is a misperception, which stems from the fact that Islamist groups are deeply patriarchal, misogynist and opposed to women entering the public space. Indeed, Islamist militants expect women to confine themselves to the domestic space and traditional domestic roles. The Afghan Taliban, for instance, enforced a rigorous code of conduct on women that included restrictions on their mobility, education, and attire. Such restrictions are enforced violently. The TTP is no different. In late July, a TTP pamphlet warned women in the North Waziristan district of Pakistan that they would “face worst consequences” if they “went out of their homes alone as it is harmful” for society (Dawn (https://www.dawn.com/news/1497395/ttp-warns-against-playing-music-women-going-out-alone-in-miramshah) , August 1).

Nothing New

Yet, as the recent suicide attack at Dera Ismail Khan reveals, the TTP is not averse to deploying women as suicide bombers or fighters. Neither is it the first time that Pakistani women militants have engaged in combat. Hundreds of burqa-clad women from the Jamia Hafsa seminary played a significant role in the events leading to and during the siege of the Lal Masjid in Islamabad in 2007 (Dawn (https://www.dawn.com/news/1345068) , July 13, 2017). Indeed, the military crackdown on the seminaries contributed to the emergence of the TTP. Hence the TTP’s recruiting of women goes back many years.

It was in 2004-2005 that the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network began carrying out suicide attacks in areas along the Afghan-Pakistan border. In some instances, the media reported that women suicide bombers were involved. However, subsequent investigations revealed that the bombers were, in fact, men. Most such attacks were carried out by the Haqqani Network. [2]

It was on June 20, 2010, that for the first confirmed time, a woman suicide bomber carried out an attack in Afghanistan’s Kunar province. Six other suicide attacks by women followed in the Af-Pak region, some of them taking a heavy toll in human lives. An attack in December 2010, for instance, targeted a food distribution camp in Bajaur in Pakistan, killing 47 people and injuring at least 100 others (Express Tribune (https://tribune.com.pk/story/94681/suicide-blast-kills-38-in-bajaur/) , December 26, 2010). There was a lull in suicide attacks by women between August 11, 2011 and the recent suicide bombing at Dera Ismail Khan.

Why Women?

Contrary to their overt position of fierce opposition to women’s participation in any activity outside the domestic sphere or departing from their traditional roles as mothers and wives, groups such as Islamic State (IS), al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the TTP have recruited women for political activities and military operations.

Among the main reasons for women being recruited for terrorist activities is that they are often not suspected of being terrorists. Neither are they searched due to local customs and traditions. Hence, women on terror missions are able to get past checkpoints or enter tightly guarded installations more easily than men. The all-enveloping burqa they wear facilitates the carrying of weapons by women and even conceals explosives that are strapped to the body of female suicide bombers. This makes them valuable as suicide bombers and couriers of weapons. Also, under pressure from military operations, groups like the TTP are seeing their fighting cadres dwindling in number. This has prompted them to step up recruitment of women fighters in recent years.

Far from Equal

Among the jihadist groups operating in the Af-Pak region, it is IS that is most vocal and highly successful in recruiting women. In comparison, groups like the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and the TTP have kept their recruitment of women hidden. This could be attributed to the fact that it could set off public revulsion and impact their support base among ordinary people. The TTP’s denial that a woman was involved in the suicide attack must be seen in this context. It is likely that the group is measuring the public reaction of suicide bombing by women in order to test the waters for similar attacks in the future.

Weakened by infighting and military offensives, the TTP’s cadre strength is falling. It is desperate for fighters. Impressed with IS’ successful recruitment of women, it is targeting disaffected and educated Muslim women—the very section that IS-Khorasan successfully attracted—through its own women’s magazine, which is called *Sunnat-e-Khaula*or The Way Of Khaula, a reference to a woman follower of the Prophet Muhammad. The magazine includes advice to potential female fighters, calling on them to “organize secret gatherings at home and invite like-minded jihadi sisters,” and “to operate simple weapons and learn the use of grenades” (NDTV (https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/jihadi-glamour-pakistani-taliban-launches-womens-magazine-1732147) , August 1, 2017).

Although women are participating in all roles in jihadist groups, they are far from equal to the male fighters. There are no women in senior or even mid-level positions of the TTP. Interestingly, none of these groups challenge gender stereotypes. In fact, they reinforce gender roles. Propaganda appeals to women to have more children and be good mothers by raising their children to become jihadists.

Vital Role

Women’s participation in Islamist and jihadist struggles is not restricted to cooking and cleaning for the male fighters. Increasingly, women are participating in combat, including suicide attacks as the recent attack in Dera Ismail Khan indicates. Importantly, they play a vital role in the survival of the jihadist group. After all, it is they who give birth to and indoctrinate future generations of jihadists.

NOTES

[1] For a more in-depth analysis of South Asia’s female militants especially those of the LTTE, see Sudha Ramachandran, “Dying to be Equal: Women Militants and Organisational Decision Making,” in*Women, Security, South Asia: A Clearing in the Thicket,*eds., Farah Faizal and Swarna Rajagopalan (New Delhi: Sage, 2005).

[2] Author’s interview with an Afghan government official on August 2.

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