

Drawing women into terrorism

Rafiq Zakaria

The theatre of brutality and barbarity enacted by Daesh — the Arabic acronym for the self-styled Islamic State — is not new to Pakistanis. For a country long embroiled in the seemingly endless fight against the Taliban, nearly all of Daesh's acts are a repeat telecast. When the Taliban march into a town, Swat or Miramshah or even the outskirts of Karachi, they ban women from public spaces, mete out their own brand of justice in town squares, unleash a barrage of floggings, beatings and beheadings. All of it is carefully documented in videos and pictures.

However, while the basics may be the same, the branding of Daesh is markedly different and far more astute. For starters, unlike the Taliban whose core is tribal and regional, and which has focused mostly on appealing to those who have some connection to one or both aspects, Daesh has cast its eyes on a much wider target market.

Like the Taliban, Daesh sports an insistent medieval aesthetic — unkempt beards and everything that harkens back to an earlier time. But if the Taliban's adoption of this look was only partly a performance (they did after all actually live in caves), Daesh's embrace of it is far more intentional and artificial. Proof of its artifice can be gleaned from the fact that alongside all the seeming primitivity are professionally produced videos with sophisticated camerawork, a core of recruiters that maintains a constant presence on social media, and a transnational sales pitch that seeks to appeal to the alienated everywhere. It is in noting these differences from the extremists of old that the dangers of Daesh become discernible.

One area where all of this is particularly obvious is the effort that Daesh is devoting to the recruitment of women. While the Taliban were largely only interested in eliminating women from the public sphere, shooting them and banning them from schools, Daesh (while not in opposition to any of the former) seems interested in recruiting them to its ranks. Unlike the Taliban, which has no women's brigade, Daesh sports the social media-savvy, all-female Al-Khansaa Brigade. In its recently released manifesto, the Brigade reiterates the usual misogynistic drivel: women must stay home and be in charge of child-rearing and



domestic affairs. At the same time, it also makes significant departures: the attack by the enemy and the insufficient number of men all cited as reasons that permit women into the battlefield. The sacrifices of women in Iraq who had to do just that are cited as a point of pride. Devout Muslim women, admittedly only those who ascribe to their very narrow idea of the function of a female, are not only welcome in Daesh, they are actually wanted.

The strategy seems to be working. A few days ago the German intelligence agency reported that 70 women, nine of whom were schoolgirls, had departed the country to join the Brigade's ranks. These numbers will further add to the 550 Western women who, according to news reports, are already serving in the Al-Khansaa Brigade.

Daesh women are not silent: they sport a near constant social media presence, serving as advertisements for the romance in being married to a warrior and of life in the utopic Muslim state to which they have migrated.

Another marked difference in the branding of Daesh is its repeated marketing of its diversity. While the Taliban may have sported some foreign fighters and even occasionally boasted about them, Daesh's propaganda takes their supra-national acceptance of every race and nationality to another level. Every publication that the group produces, particularly issues of its magazine Dabiq, boast of its multilingual and multiracial composition.

If the Taliban were a local conglomerate, Daesh is the multinational seeking to harness markets for extremism in several different continents and eager to flaunt its international reach in attracting others to its ranks. If the Taliban were simply radical, then Daesh attempts to be both global and radical, avow both the medieval and the post-modern, the virtual and

the real.

Sophistication, however, does not suggest improvement in ethical or moral terms. The central core of Daesh, much like the Taliban, is just as distorted, rotten and grotesque. The romanticised tweets in which Daesh's female recruits sing praises of married life in war-torn Syria shield the ugly reality of thousands of women declared war booty and raped, or forced into marriage, and the gruesome constraints of life in a land controlled by a murderous group.

Daesh seems to think closely about which aspects of its identity are to be publicised. If the Taliban are brutal and managed via this fact to gather international media attention, Daesh is deliberately so to attract the media. Not only can they plan when they will get attention for this or that act of brutality, they count on doing so. This hard image of the group is countered by the soft one proffered in tweets and blogs by its female recruits. Cumulatively, then, different dimensions are conjured up for different audiences; the western journalist and the potential recruit both barraged with material designed to produce certain sorts of reactions.

The emergence of an extremist group that is more sophisticated in the way it sells itself, both as a formidable enemy and a haven for the disgruntled and desperate, could in its own way spell the end of the small local extremist group. In Pakistan, where the latter happily proliferates, with every flavour of religious distortion represented in its variety, this could produce a war between local and global extremisms. The hopeful could say that it is perhaps this exact sort of infighting that could, with the passage of enough time, spell an end to extremism itself. Since state and society have both failed in their extermination, perhaps they will simply eventually kill themselves.