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‘There hasn’t been rehabilitation’: Afghanistan struggles with fate of ‘Daesh wives’

The Afghan government is facing hard decisions over the futures of hundreds of detained radicalised women and their children.

By Elise Blanchard

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“Daesh wives” from the Afghan branch of Islamic State look very young. Most are already mothers.

Hundreds of them have fled combat, airstrikes and near-starvation in eastern Afghanistan where the faction of Isis known as Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK) has been under fierce bombardment from Afghan and US special forces, as well as involved in violent clashes with rival militants the Taliban.

Last November, after a military operation, President Ashraf Ghani declared Isis “obliterated” in the region where it first gained a foothold in 2014, and more than 225 militants, 190 women and 208 children surrendered.

In Jalalabad city, separated from the male fighters who were taken to other detention centres or prisons, the women were first housed by local authorities in a makeshift accommodation centre, awaiting transfer to Kabul or back to the remote Afghan and Pakistani tribal areas where most originated.

In the centre, children were everywhere— running, laughing, playing with colourful toys. On the walls they’d drawn drones, explosions, men shooting AK-47s from pickup trucks— memories of their time spent in hell near the Pakistani border in Nangarhar province, ISK’s former stronghold.

Weakened and pushed farther north, the group, with an estimated 2,200 armed fighters, retains sleeper cells in cities such as Kabul, and continues to claim responsibility for murderous attacks on civilians.

Most of the girls and women the Guardian spoke to in Jalalabad and in the detention centre of the Afghan intelligence services in Kabul refuse to criticise ISK.

“Only God knows if Daesh is good or bad,” says Asma, 15, from the tribal areas, and mother of a little girl. Why did she join the fighters? “My father gave me to my husband,” she says. “I was scared.”

Lyla Schwartz, a psychologist supporting some of the girls in the Kabul juvenile detention centre, says this was probably true. “In this context and culture, I don’t think it’s very likely that all of these girls had a say if they joined or not.

“The children and women experience sexual abuse,” she adds. “Do they support the group? No. Ideologies? Yes. Do they believe in an Islamic state where people practise certain things and believe certain situations and things they have been taught? Yes. And is that pretty strict and conservative? I would say yes. But they don’t agree in the fighting, and the war and the trauma that they see.”

But Schwartz, founder of the NGO Peace of Mind Afghanistan, is concerned at the lack of care for the women and girls. “There hasn’t been rehabilitation, like education, psychological processing of trauma.”

Asma followed her husband when he crossed the border with Isis but she had to surrender, she says, to escape “the bombs that fall from the sky”.

Most of the dozens of family members we interviewed spoke of airstrikes that had killed many women and children. It was in this region in 2017 that President Donald Trump tested the largest conventional bomb ever dropped by in combat by the US, his “mother of all bombs”. –

“A bomb blast killed my baby and I picked up his body piece by piece,” says Hamida, who said she was “19 or 20”.

“Americans did it,” she adds. Like Asma, Hamida is an ethnic Pashtun from the tribal areas. She joined at 15, with a husband who was also underage at the time. “Isis taught him how to use weapons and that fighting with others was good work,” she says.

In another room, Mariam, 16, was resting, heavily pregnant with her second child. Her Afghan village, Takhto, was the theatre for shocking atrocities. One video showed ISK members killing local elders by making them kneel on explosives.

Mariam says she misses her husband, a Pakistani fighter twice her age. She was given to him as a wife by her brother-in-law after ISK took over her village.

“We stayed back home and served our husbands,” recounts her

cousin, another 15-year-old Afghan mother. “Now we want to go back to our home.”

Other women came from farther afield, from central and south Asia or from Europe, sometimes more educated, sometimes joining a son or brother.

Deeba, 52, sold her house in Lahore and came to Afghanistan with her family to join her son, already living with Isis there. “He told us only here is pure Islam, that coming is like the Islamic [hajj],” she says, seated in the detention centre.

In the mountains, Deeba kept running the family: she remarried her daughter-in-law to another of her sons when the first was killed in an airstrike. She arranged the marriage of her widowed daughter, Rewa — who had lost her husband in combat just a month after their wedding — to a nephew who himself had lost his first wife in a rocket explosion.

Despite so much sorrow in her 22 years, Rewa is cheerful. “Life was simple there, we chose to live just like our prophet used to live ... we were happy,” she says.

“The men in Daesh were better than the men here ... they would turn their eyes not to look at us.” And attacks on civilians? “I swear it’s a big lie ... they have never done anything like that,” she responds.

Atfah, 24, from Punjab, arrived from Pakistan to live with Isis about three years ago, with her sisters and mother, an ex-English teacher. One brother died fighting in Syria. A second one told them to join him in Afghanistan.

“My brother called us to come for jihad,” she says. “He said that the Americans drop airstrikes and put bombs on Muslims, and kill our children and women ... That’s why we do jihad.”

Handling hundreds of women and children is an unprecedented challenge for the government.

For Javid Faisal, spokesman of the Afghan National Security Council, the women are a threat. “Wives and children of Daesh fighters were all radicalised to an extreme level,” he warned. “We can’t release them the way they are right now.”

But the reality is more nuanced. According to a security source working on the issue, although some women did have an active role and are awaiting trial for membership of a terrorist group, others “are here because they were accompanying their husbands, and didn’t participate as fighters or support”.

For these women, authorities are trying to establish identities, to send them back to their families or embassies. It is a long process, dogged by political wrangling.

While many women fear being sent home, Ela, 30, wants to leave

at any cost. Originally from Turkey, she was troubled by what she found in the rough, remote mountains of Nangarhar. “Afghanistan is like a different planet,” she says.

She is one of the few with harsh words about the fighters: “They think women don’t understand anything.”

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