

# '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

The Guardian (26.06.2020) – <https://bit.ly/38cp8w6> – The “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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**Punish those responsible for the Sri Lanka attacks, not**

# Muslim minorities

By Farahnaz Ispahani

Religious Freedom Institute (24.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2XHqs3K> – The largest single attack on Sri Lankan soil was not claimed by any extremist group until early Tuesday when ISIS declared responsibility. ISIS has conducted targeted attacks on Easter in the past, so the likelihood that the little-known Sri Lankan Islamic radical group, National Towheeth Jamaath (NTJ), is actually an ISIS affiliate or franchisee seems plausible.

Sri Lankans are trying to pick up the pieces after this attack, which consisted of a series of coordinated bomb blasts that ripped through churches and hotels on Easter Sunday, leaving almost 321 people dead and over 500 injured at last count. Until the ISIS claim of responsibility, the Sri Lankan government was pinning the blame on a local Islamist extremist group. This was seen by some as an attempt to create friction between the Christian and Muslim communities and demonize Sri Lankan Muslims right before the elections. The government, beset with conflict between the president and prime minister, is already being accused of negligence in ignoring intelligence about the attacks.

World faith leaders have expressed condemnation and sympathy, including Pope Francis, who expressed closeness to the Sri Lankan Christian community and said “to all the victims of such cruel violence, I entrust to the Lord all those who are tragically gone and I pray for the wounded and all those who suffer because of this tragic event.”

Egypt’s Al-Azhar University is the Sunni Muslim world’s foremost religious institution, and it’s Grand Imam Shaikh Ahmed al-Tayeb said, “I cannot imagine a human being could target the peaceful on their celebration day,” and that “Those

terrorists' perverted disposition goes against the teachings of all religions." "I pray," added Shaikh Tayeb, "that God grants patience to the families of the casualties and recovery to the injured."

The Sri Lankan government said they were investigating international assistance to NTJ. Until yesterday, NTJ was an obscure Sri Lankan Islamist group best known for vandalizing Buddha statues and demanding that women be fully veiled.

Muslim and Christian discord has been very minimal in Sri Lankan society. Both Christians and Muslims are religious minorities there. Since the major conflict issue for Sri Lanka in the past was always ethnic, the main source of unrest was a decades long, head-on clash between the ethnic Tamils and the Sinhalese.

Amarnath Amarasingam, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue who studies extremism in Sri Lanka and the region said in a recent interview in the New Yorker Magazine:

As far as I know, there was no real conflict between Muslims and the Christians. Particularly in the east, they lived quite happily. The Tamil communities, the Christian communities, the Muslim community—it is a very diverse area. And I would say the same thing about Colombo. There was no real conflict like that. It is partly the targeting of the Christian population that makes me think it is not just a local-born and -bred Muslim organization that planned and carried out this operation. The targeting of churches, Christian communities, during Easter has a very international-jihadist component to it.

According to the U.S. State Department's 2017 Annual Religious Freedom Report:

Attacks on religious minorities continued unabated from the previous year. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of



Sri Lanka (NCEASL) documented 97 incidents of attacks on churches, intimidation and violence against pastors and their congregations, and obstruction of worship services. The Sri Lankan Muslim Council (MCSL) reported dozens of violent attacks on mosques and Muslim prayer rooms during the year, especially during Ramadan. Buddhist nationalist groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, Buddhist Power Force) continued to promote the supremacy of the ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist majority and denigrate religious and ethnic minorities, especially via social media.

It is very difficult to understand how a small, local terrorist group like NTJ could coordinate an attack of this scale unless supported from the outside, and with ISIS's recent claim of involvement, it may be the source of such support. This coordinated act of terror is reminiscent of the Pulwama attack in Kashmir recently. In the Pulwama attack, a Pakistani based extremist Islamist group, Jaish e Muhammad, claimed responsibility. The suicide bomber was a young local Kashmiri from Pulwama district and a member of Jaish-e-Mohammed.

This attack is also reminiscent of the Mumbai, India attacks in July 2011, which consisted of a series of three coordinated bomb explosions at different locations across the city. Jaish e Muhammad also took responsibility for that incident.

From the start, ISIS had been discussed as a possible suspect. They have often targeted both ancient and modern churches and peoples, including Christians, Yezidis, and Shia Muslims. Moreover, it is indisputable that they have the capability. When ISIS's AMAQ news propaganda agency claimed responsibility yesterday for the blasts, no one should have been taken by surprise. The group, which has previously made a series of unsupported claims, did not provide any evidence.

Elsewhere in the region, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party colleagues have been intensifying their anti-

Muslim rhetoric and pursuing anti-Muslim immigration legislation during the Indian elections. In addition, Pakistani politicians, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, used the Blasphemy and Anti-Ahmadiyya card to denigrate Muslims during his election campaign. The cancer of hatred for 'the other' has today spread all over South Asia and now, increasingly, in Southeast Asia as well.

Even in the West today politicians play up religious sentiment and anti-otherness to win elections. In this context we must keep in mind that the Sri Lankan elections are also on the horizon, slated to be held by December of this year.

The use of hate speech and naming and blaming religious minorities for attacks on civilians and military personnel is extremely dangerous. The religious minorities in Sri Lanka are facing greater persecution today than at any other time in the nation's history. This hatred and otherization of Sri Lankan Christians and Muslims may play well to the Buddhist majority, particularly before a national election, but as the global trend shows, this approach damages a society's integrity, economy, and finally its stability. After fighting an ethnic war for decades one hopes the Sri Lankan government tones down its blame game and finds the actual culprit behind this highly sophisticated attack. Upon the conclusion of a proper investigation, may the government act decisively to punish those responsible according to all international mechanisms available.

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## **IRAQ: In Iraq, Christians return home – also for the sake of the children of the diaspora**

*Chaldean Father Thabet Habib Youssef, pastor of the Church of St. Adday in the Christian town of Karamles, on Iraq's Nineveh Plains, helps oversee the reconstruction and repair of Christian homes and Church properties in Karamles. He spoke with Aid in the Church in Need about the prospects for Christians who have returned home to the Nineveh Plains after being forced into exile in Kurdistan by the invasion of ISIS in the summer of 2014.*

ACN (21.02.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2tDLCmm> – “In the past, we have been subjected to many attacks and invasions. But each time, we have returned as faithful and authentic believers; we have reaffirmed our roots. The Christian presence in Iraq can continue, though things won't be as they were before 2014.

“The Christian discourse has always focused more on national identity than on religious identity. National identity is the

common link that makes conversation and coexistence—the acceptance of the other—possible. Our mission as clerics—to deepen faith among believers—does not prevent us from speaking directly to non-Christians about issues of national importance, on issues that affect all Iraqis.

“We have repeatedly asked for legislation that would ensure the safety and privacy of Christians. To this day, we work around older laws that do not protect endangered areas. Demographic changes are a threat to Christians in the Nineveh Plains, and the Iraqi government will remain deficient if the problem is not resolved by firm and stable laws.

“We need to stage a global intervention that puts pressure on the Iraqi government to comply with all decisions issued by the United Nations and its constituencies.

“Many Christians had lost hope of returning. Today, 330 families have returned to Karamles, and so far we have repaired 382 out of 754 damaged Christian homes in the town. We have restored the Sanctuary of St. Barbara and the Church of St. Adday, which had been partly burned, and also repaired the Church of the Virgin Mary. We perform as many basic services as we can. We’ve responded to water shortages and provided support for farmers on land destroyed by military activity.

“We do not know if every family will return to the Nineveh Plains, but we do believe that all Christians have a duty to shape the identity of the region. We want to live on our land, and we ask that our people stand with us. We must preserve our

identity and history for the sake of children of the diaspora—our enduring presence here must not be compromised.”

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## **PHILIPPINES: Isis claims attack on Jolo cathedral. Bishops: ‘United against extremism’**

*Two suicide bombers detonated explosive belts inside the church and near the parking lot. Five soldiers, a Coast Guard member and 12 civilians were killed in the attack, while*

***another 83 people were injured. From Pamama, Pope Francis expresses “the most firm reprobation”.***

AsiaNews (28.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2WsQdos> – A few hours after the twin attack on the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Jolo (Sulu) yesterday morning, the Filipino bishops invite Christians to “shake hands with all the peace-loving communities , in defense against violent extremism “.

The Islamic State (IS) claimed last night the latest act of violence against the Catholic community of Jolo, an Islamist stronghold on the southern island of Mindanao. This is stated by the SITE Intelligence Group, an organization that monitors jihadist activities on the internet. The terrorist group has released an official statement stating that two suicide bombers detonated their explosive belts inside the church and near the parking lot.

Meanwhile, the police of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (Armm) revises the death toll: the spokesman Gerry Besana declares that five soldiers, a Coast Guard member and 12 civilians were killed in the attack. 83 other people were injured. From Pamama, Pope Francis expressed “the strongest condemnation for this episode of violence, which brings new loss of life to this Christian community”.

Msgr. Angelito Rendon Lampon, former bishop of Jolo and new archbishop of Cotabato, said: “In my 20 years, from 1998 to last week, there have been seven hand grenades launched at our cathedral”.

Below the full text of the document issued by the Episcopal Conference (CBC) after the terrible attack.

We, Catholic Bishops gathered in our Plenary Assembly in Manila, received today the sad news from Fr. Romeo S. Saniel, OMI, Apostolic Administrator of Jolo, of the bombing of the Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Cathedral in Jolo during the Sunday Mass.

We condole with the families of the several soldiers and civilians who were killed by the explosions. We also express our sympathies with those who were wounded and extend our solidarity with the rest of the church-goers inside the Cathedral and the rest of the church community in the Apostolic Vicariate of Jolo.

At the same time, we condemn this act of terrorism that has taken place only a few days after the plebiscite on the Bangsamoro Organic Law.

As we begin a new phase in the peace process with the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARRM), we ask our Christian brethren to join hands with all peace-loving Muslim and Indigenous People communities in the advocacy against violent extremism.

May all our religions of peace guide us in our quest for a brighter future for the peoples of Mindanao.

From the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

+ Romulo G. Valles

Archbishop of Davao

President, CBCP

January 27, 2019

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# **UNITED STATES/IRAQ/SYRIA: H.R.390 – Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2018 115th Congress (2017-2018) | 11 December 2018**

## *Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2017*

Congress (11.12.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2PzUamI> – (Sec. 4) This bill states that it is U.S. policy to ensure that humanitarian, stabilization, and recovery assistance for nationals and residents of Iraq or Syria, and of communities from those countries, is directed toward ethnic and minority individuals and communities with the greatest need, including those individuals and communities that are at risk of persecution or war crimes.

(Sec. 5) The Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development may provide assistance, including financial and technical assistance, to support the efforts of entities, including nongovernmental organizations with expertise in international criminal investigations and law, to address crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes in Iraq since January 2014 by:

- conducting criminal investigations,
- developing indigenous investigative and judicial skills

- to adjudicate cases consistent with due process and respect for the rule of law, and
- collecting and preserving evidence for use in prosecutions.

The State Department shall encourage foreign governments to identify and prosecute individuals who are suspected of committing such crimes, including members of foreign terrorist organizations operating in Iraq or Syria.

(Sec. 6) The State Department shall identify:

- threats of persecution, genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes against members of Iraqi or Syrian religious or ethnic groups that are minorities in Iraq or in Syria with respect to whom the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has committed such crimes in Iraq or Syria since January 2014 or who are members of other persecuted religious or ethnic groups;
- persecuted religious and ethnic minority groups in Iraq or Syria that are at risk of forced migration and the primary reasons for such risk;
- humanitarian, stabilization, and recovery needs of these individuals; and
- entities, including faith-based entities, that are providing such assistance and the extent of U.S. assistance to or through such entities.

(Sec. 7) The State Department shall provide Congress with:

- a description of the efforts taken and proposed to implement this bill; and
- an assessment of the feasibility and advisability of prosecuting individuals for acts of genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes in Iraq since January 2014 or in Syria since March 2011.

See as well : Trump signs bill to help religious minorities in Iraq, Syria:

<https://www.apnews.com/6c456d1fc4f1443699eb7ef8b7670e92>

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