

TERROR AND THE FAMILY: HOW JIHADI GROUPS ARE REDEFINING THE ROLE OF WOMEN

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The first issue of *Sunnat-e-Khula*, the flagship women's magazine of the Pakistani Taliban, has as its central feature a story of rebellion. Written in the first person, it begins with the narrator, a single woman named Khaula, waiting at an airport in the West.

She is eager to leave, abandon the land of the infidel, and make her way to Khorasan, the name used by the Taliban for what is now Afghanistan. Reading on, we learn that Khaula is a doctor, the daughter of an officer in the Pakistan Army. She was educated in the military's secular schools, which kept her from truly understanding Islam. After medical school in Lahore, she makes her way to the West. There, after initially being dazzled by the glitz of Western life, she experiences an existential crisis that leads her to embark on a global search for true spirituality.

She doesn't find it anywhere. Khaula is deep in a pit of desolation when she encounters a teacher, a pious Muslim woman who guides her religious awakening. The decisions that come next are not easy; in the remaining pages of the essay, Khaula documents how she must eventually abandon her family, including her father, to follow the spiritual path. Though she loves him, he is morally compromised, a pawn officer in the British-style Pakistani military awash in the blood of Taliban martyrs. The final exit is dramatic: Her father follows her in his car as she departs for the airport, presumably en route to Khorasan. He tries to stop her, tries to make her conform, but she is stalwart, as true warrior Muslim women must be. She leaves, never to return.

At its outset, the story, repetitive and roughly told, is not particularly notable. There are the usual propagandist claims common to jihadi literature, the crude binaries exempting all but the group's adherents from true and correct Islam. The novelty of the story is that it is told by a woman, and that it overtly prescribes rebellion against the strictures of home, family, and even male guardianship. That the story is the central feature of

the very first issue of the Pakistani Taliban women's magazine, released in August, is even more noteworthy. The group, known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has issued edicts banning women from public spaces and requiring them to be accompanied by a male guardian at all times. Yet, in *Sunnat-e-Khaula*, TTP advocates a complete role reversal. Per its revamped recruitment efforts, designed to help the group compete with the Islamic State for female recruits, TTP reminds women in the pages of the magazine that "Islam's first martyr was a woman, first to accept Islam was a woman, first to spend for the sake of Allah was a woman, and first to support the Holy Prophet was a woman." It is impossible to know whether the author is actually female, who she says she is, a compendium of several others, or the creation of a male propagandist. It is notable, however, that the Taliban want to create the impression of autobiography. Those who silenced women with such cruelty now seemingly seek to give them a voice.

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's turn from seeking to eliminate women from the public sphere to envisioning them as warriors who must forsake their families to make the *hijra*, or migration to Khorasan, denotes a crucial change in direction. It reflects a new female identity that advocates rebellion against traditional structures, the same structures the Taliban resolved to uphold and resurrect when it first came to power in Afghanistan in 1996. While TTP is not announcing it will abandon these policies, the fact that one of its publications would encourage women to defy their fathers and migrate alone is revolutionary. It signifies how notions of femininity, domesticity, and family are being transformed by the efforts of jihadi groups to vie for female recruits.

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TRADING A WHITE DRESS FOR WEAPONS

Sunnat-e-Khaura aims to be different from the start. Even its title is borrowed from a heroine of early Islam, a female fighter named Khaura who lived during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The contents feature not just the first-person narrative of a modern-day Khaura but also an interview with the wife of Tehreek-e-Taliban leader Fazal Hayat, the group's erstwhile "first lady." Here, too, is role-bending: The commander, we are told, would do household chores in the early days of their marriage, a laughable idea for most Pashtun men. As the years passed, he remained sweet-tempered, chiding his wife only when she missed her prayers. If the rebel Khaura offers one model of femininity, the Taliban wife provides another. In both cases, however, there is a pointed rejection of the idea that a Muslim woman must be beholden to her father's whims, abridge her jihadi desires, or embrace domesticity.

The Taliban's efforts to turn Muslim women into jihadis are undoubtedly inspired by the success of the Islamic State. Formed in 1999, the Islamic State began to recruit women around 2010. If the Taliban have settled on Khaura as a means of embracing women's presence on the battlefield, the Islamic State did the same with Nusaybah Bint Ka'ab, a common figure in their recruiting materials directed to women. Ka'ab fought alongside her husband and sons in the 7th-century Battle of Uhud, which is central to Islamic history. Armed with shield and sword, Ka'ab sustained wounds and inflicted them on others. Women inspired by her example could train in the Islamic State's Al-Zawra School for female recruits. The group says on its website that it serves women who are "interested in explosive belt and suicide bombing more than in a white dress or a castle." Upon completion of their training, they have the option of joining the Islamic State's all-female Al-Khansaa Brigade, named after a poetess who composed verses for slain warriors in the early years of Islam.

It's undeniable that the Taliban are borrowing from the Islamic State's playbook. Not only has the Islamic State been able to attract women from the West to enter its ranks, their participation has produced significant strategic value. According to various media reports, the women have enabled the group to network, recruit, and propagandize in ways that have lent it greater visibility worldwide. Female recruits have also provided moral support as wives to male fighters. As a recent *RUSI Journal* report on the Islamic State's female recruitment suggests, women, including those from the West, are not duped into joining the group. Rather, they are seduced by promises of freedom from Western Islamophobia and a drab domestic life.

The Taliban have more modest recruitment goals, but they too present jihad as an escape from the ordinary life of middle-class Pakistani girls. An English-language magazine whose centerpiece is a story of a single woman, a medical doctor who has trained abroad, is designed to speak to strong women and girls who seek more than what is available to them at home. At the center of this story is faith; girls are free to reject suitors chosen by their parents if they are insufficiently pious or unwilling to go to war for Islam. Here is a rebellion that is not simply permissible but even required of good Muslim women, women who want to play an active role in the world, albeit under the ultimate leadership of men. When Khaura's father tells her that life will be difficult in Khorasan, that she, a middle-class girl raised in an officer's household, will have to cook on a wood fire and perhaps even live in a cave, she is undeterred. Her father, of course, has missed the point; it is precisely for those reasons, rather than despite them, that she wants to go.

To allow for this path of rebellion, jihadis have engaged in religious redefinition and reinterpretation. According to this modified vision, the traditional family structure, headed by a father, may be disregarded if he is not sufficiently

observant. A new family in Khorasan or Syria can be found instead. Single women traveling to either can expect to marry a male warrior equally committed to jihad. The jihadi group is deemed the new guardian, its radical agenda overriding other obstacles to women abandoning their families and traveling alone. The creation of a new genealogy of warrior women, and the resurrection of early Islamic female figures such as Khaula, Nusaybah Bint Ka'ab, and the poetess Khansaa, help extend the jihadi project back into the Islamic past, investing it with an authenticity it would otherwise lack.

In their outreach, groups like the Islamic State and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan are capitalizing on the frustrations of Muslim women. To female Muslims in the West, the Islamic State presents migration to the Caliphate as an escape from discrimination, harassment, and employment bias. The Taliban court middle-

class Pakistani women who are dissatisfied with the options available to them in Pakistani society. The dangers of this propaganda, however, are not limited to the women who may be attracted to their cause.

In the West, orientalist perceptions of Muslim women have held that they are submissive and naïve, and hence pose less of a threat than Muslim men. Former British Prime Minister David Cameron even suggested that Muslim women could be a moderating force on their husbands because of their “traditional submissiveness.” In the wake of TTP and Islamic State efforts to recruit women, the pendulum may swing in the other direction, with Western counterterrorism officials starting to instead scrutinize Muslim women as subversive. That could lead to greater discrimination toward these women, which in turn may increase the potency of the propaganda directed at them. ●