

Islamic State's double standards sow growing disillusion

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Gaziantep (Turkey): Mohammed Saad, a Syrian activist, was imprisoned by the Islamic State group, hung by his arms and beaten regularly. Then one day, his jailers quickly pulled him and other prisoners down and hid them in a bathroom.

The reason? A senior Muslim cleric was visiting to inspect the facility. The cleric had told the fighters running the prison that they shouldn't torture prisoners and that anyone held without charge must be released within 30 days, Saad told The Associated Press. Once the coast was clear, the prisoners were returned to their torment.

"It's a criminal gang pretending to be a state," Saad said, speaking in Turkey, where he fled in October. "All this talk about applying Shariah and Islamic values is just propaganda, Daesh is about torture and killing," he said, using the Arabic acronym for IS.

Syrians who have recently escaped the Islamic State group's rule say public disillusionment is growing as IS has failed to live up to its promises to install a utopian "Islamic" rule of justice, equality and good governance.

Instead, the group has come to resemble the dictatorial rule of Syrian President Bashar Assad that many Syrians had sought to shed, with a reliance on informers who have silenced a fearful populace. Rather than equality, society has seen the rise of a new elite class — the jihadi fighters — who enjoy special perks and favor in the courts, looking down on "the commoners" and even ignoring the rulings of their own clerics.

Despite the atrocities that made it notorious, the Islamic State group had raised hopes among some fellow Sunnis when it overran their territories across parts of Syria and Iraq and declared a "caliphate" in the summer of 2014. It presented itself as a contrast to Assad's rule, bringing justice through its extreme interpretation of Shariah and providing services to residents, including loans to farmers, water and electricity, and alms to the poor. Its propaganda machine promoting the dream of an Islamic caliphate helped attract jihadis from around the world.

In Istanbul and several Turkish cities near the Syrian border, the AP spoke to more than a dozen Syrians who fled IS-controlled territory in recent months. Most spoke on condition they be identified only by their first names or by the nicknames they use in their political activism for fear of IS reprisals against themselves or family.

"Daesh justice has been erratic," said Nayef, who hails from IS-held eastern Syrian town of al-Shadadi and escaped to Turkey in November with his family, largely because of Russian airstrikes. "They started off good and then, gradually, things got worse." He insisted that his last name not be printed, fearing for his safety.

The group has recruited informers in the towns and cities it controls to watch out for any sign of opposition.

"Like under the (Assad) regime, we were also afraid to talk against Daesh to anyone we don't fully trust," said Fatimah, a 33-year-old whose hometown of Palmyra was taken over by IS early last year. She fled to Turkey in November with her husband and five children to escape Russian and Syrian airstrikes.

IS has also become less able to provide public services, in large part because military reversals appear to have put strains on its finances. U.S. and Russian airstrikes have heavily hit its oil infrastructure — a major source of funds. Over the past year, the group has lost 30 percent of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria, according to the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition. Many of those interviewed by the AP said there are lengthier cutoffs of water and electricity in their towns and cities and prices for oil and gas have risen.

Abu Salem, an activist from the eastern city of Deir el-Zour, said public acceptance of IS rule is eroding. "It has made an enemy of almost everyone," he told the AP in the Turkish city of Reyhanli on the Syrian border.

One sign of the distance between the claims and realities is a 12-page manifesto by IS detailing its judicial system. The document, a copy of which was obtained by the AP, heavily emphasizes justice and tolerance. For example, it sets out the duties of the Hisba, the "religious police" who ensure people adhere to the group's dress codes, strict separation of genders and other rules.

A Hisba member "must be gentle and pleasant toward those he orders or reprimands," it says. "He must be flexible and good mannered so that his influence is greater and the response (he gets) is stronger."

Yet, the escaped Syrians all complained of the brutal extremes that the Hisba resorts to. One woman who lived in Raqqa said that if a woman is considered to have violated the dress codes, the militants flog her husband, since he is seen as responsible for her. When her neighbor put out the garbage without being properly covered, she said, the woman's husband was whipped.

Abu Manaf, a 44-year-old from Deir el-Zour, said some clerics challenged the group's enforcers over their wanton use of strict Shariah punishments like beheadings, stoning to death, flogging and cutting off limbs. More moderate clerics in IS argued that such punishments can only be implemented under specific conditions. They also complained about the jihadis' custom of displaying bodies of the beheaded in public as an example to others, violating Islamic tenets requiring the swift burial of the dead.

"Many of those moderate clerics disappear, are killed or jailed for crimes they did not commit," said Abu Manaf, who left Deir el-Zour in November, then stayed in the Islamic State group's de facto capital, Raqqa, for three weeks before he reached Turkey. Saad's account of his imprisonment in his home city of Deir el-Zour reflected the tensions between the fighters and some clerics.

He was arrested because of his media activism, reporting on the anti-Assad opposition. IS suspected him of belonging to the rebel Free Syrian Army, which is fighting the extremists. The day the cleric came to inspect the prison set up in a former police station he heard the cleric asking the guards if the prisoners were getting enough food and water, and whether they were being beaten, Saad said.

On another occasion, a cleric and a judge visited and spoke to the prisoners in their cells. Saad said they told him to write on a piece of paper his name, why he'd been jailed and whether he had been tortured or made to confess under duress.

He wrote that he had not been beaten, because he knew the guards would punish him if he said he had been, Saad said.

After five months in custody, Saad said he secured his release by agreeing to do media work for IS. For three months, he helped put together videos and other propaganda before escaping to Turkey.

The Syrians interviewed in Turkey said that in IS courts the judges often show a bias toward IS operatives in any legal dispute with the general public. Judges justify the bias by pointing to Quranic verses or sayings of the prophet Muhammad, including "God prefers those who fight in jihad over those who sit." Often, IS members refer to the general population by the dismissive term "al-awam," Arabic for "the commoners."

Hossam, who owned a women's clothes shop in Raqqa, said IS members receive perks that sharply set them apart

from everyone else. In many cases, young men join the group to escape poverty or protect themselves from IS excesses, he and others said. He insisted that his last name not be printed, fearing for his safety.

"Those who join Daesh receive a step up in the social ladder," he told the AP in Istanbul. "Daesh men drive luxury cars and eat at the best restaurants and whoever has a friend or a relative with Daesh has a better life."

One perk that IS members avail themselves of is the chance to marry local women. Several of the Syrians interviewed by the AP said families with daughters often came under pressure to marry them off to fighters, which has led many to smuggle daughters to Turkey.

Khatar, a 26-year-old who spoke in Lesbos, Greece, making her way to Western Europe, said she has two younger sisters back in Raqqa, and jihadis "have been knocking on our doors at least once a month to ask for their hands in marriage." Her father lies to them and tells them he doesn't have unmarried daughters, "but they keep coming back."

But some take the opportunity to marry an IS member because the benefits lift the whole family out of the "al-awam" class.

Khatar said a 17-year-old daughter of one of her neighbors married a Saudi jihadi. When Khatar went to congratulate her, she found her loaded with expensive clothes and jewelry as a dowry. "She seemed very happy with her new, elevated social status," Khatar said.

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