

## Mistake in joining IS' 'romantic war'



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**TRUE HEROISM:** Instead of playing Rambo and committing murder in foreign nations, the 'warriors' should raise their kids to be responsible and educated citizens



*The Rambo-esque illusion for the foreign militants who joined the IS movement in Syria and Iraq was shattered when they were confined to a life of menial labour.*

**OVER** the past few months, there has been a steady stream of reports about foreign militants who, after leaving their countries to join the radical Islamic State militant movement in Syria and Iraq, have decided to repent their ways and return home. The testimonies that have been collected from these erstwhile "warriors" are interesting, for they tell of how many of them were soon disillusioned by what they saw and experienced in the war zone, with some of them not even allowed to take part in the fighting and asked to clean toilets and cook for the other "real soldiers" instead. Expecting a life of glory and martyrdom, some of them found instead a life of menial labour and were expected to perform valorous deeds such as cooking rice and cleaning plates — not at all the "Rambo-esque" epic fantasy they had in mind.

Equally interesting are the reasons that were given by some of these foreign fighters for joining IS in the first place. Many of those who came from Europe spoke of the need for a life of purpose, the need for meaning and value in life, a need for recognition and honour and respect, which they claimed that they did not have in the West (and apparently not in the East either, as it has turned out).

Underlying this phenomena is the deeper question of meaning and purpose in life, and the need to escape the humdrum daily routine of modern urban societies. It is fundamentally a problem of alienation and isolation, which happen to be problems as old as modernity itself.

But, in response to the plight of these young men and women, one may reply with two obvious retorts: firstly, one does not escape the dullness and routine of modern life by escaping into a fantasy of glorious violence and radical extremism, and certainly not use religion as an excuse for such escapism. If these men genuinely believe that what they have been doing has been for the good of their faith community, then they ought to ask themselves the simple question of how any violent upheaval that leads to the destruction of civil architecture, the breakdown of law and order and the killing of innocents can possibly have a positive effect on the good name and image of the religion they profess. Living as we do at a time when anti-Arab-Muslim stereotypes are already sadly in circulation, have these foreign fighters not merely reinforced the worst stereotypes about Muslim masculinity? This was never a victory in any sense, but an own goal of the highest order.

And, should these would-be jihadists want to truly live up to role models that are found in Muslim history, they may consider the fact that much of the life of the Prophet was spent in negotiation, dialogue and building bridges between different communities. And, there is also the long-established legacy of scientific research and analysis in both the hard sciences and the humanities, with notable Arab-Muslim scholars such as Ibn Khaldun, al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina and al-Biruni to consider: men whose lasting contribution to humanity has come in the form of beneficial knowledge for the human race as a whole, and men who chose to write books rather than burn books and bomb libraries. None of these scholars opted for the equivalent of the “Rambo path” to success in their time, and they all chose the life of dedicated labour and quiet perseverance instead — at times even at the cost of their own personal safety and liberty. These are the individuals who ought to be lauded as true heroes today, and not simply forgotten.

Secondly, we all need to understand and reassess our own notions of success, bravery, purpose and meaning in life today. Many of these men abandoned their families and friends, and the responsibilities that go with such attachments, to join a foreign cause that is alien to their own immediate needs and circumstances. This includes men who have abandoned their wives and children, allowing them to fend for themselves and deal with the consequences alone. But surely the true test of manhood and masculinity is to stay the course, fulfil one’s moral and filial obligations, and labour on despite the trying circumstances one faces? For too long, masculinity has been defined in terms of machismo, aggression and the propensity to act violently. Yet, it could be argued that true masculinity lies in the stronger capacity to resist violence, to shoulder burdens with dignity, to fulfil responsibilities with honour, and thus gain true respect for being a real man.

I profess to have no sympathy whatsoever for men who abandon their families to go and fight some “romantic war” hundreds of miles away when their real duty lies at home with their families and co-workers. Instead of playing “Rambo” and committing murder in foreign countries, try staying the course and raising your kids until they grow up to be mature, responsible citizens with education and prospects. Some men might find that boring, but that is where true dedication and heroism lie.

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