

# **Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?**

Edited by **Yoram Schweitzer**

## **The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies (JCSS)**

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Memorandum No. 84

August 2006

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**Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies**

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**TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY**

**טרור המתאבדות:  
מתות לשוויון?**

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יורם שוייצר, עורך

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*This study is published  
with the assistance of the gift of the late  
**Esther Engelberg***

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Editor: Judith Rosen  
Graphic Design: Michal Semo  
Cover Design: Yael Kfir  
Printing House: Kedem Printing

**Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies**

Tel Aviv University  
Ramat Aviv  
Tel Aviv 69978  
Israel

Tel. +972-3 640-9926  
Fax. +972-3 642-2404

E-mail: [jcss2@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:jcss2@post.tau.ac.il)  
<http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/>

ISBN: 965-459-066-2  
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August 2006  
Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies  
Tel Aviv University

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# Introduction

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**Yoram Schweitzer**

Over the last few years, women suicide bombers have earned the dubious distinction of appearing more newsworthy than their male counterparts. While investigative reporting on a male suicide bomber is often extensive, coverage of a female suicide bomber seems to result in more widespread media exposure. This may serve as another expression of the prevailing belief that women, unlike men, must have unique and excessively abnormal reasons for committing what is deemed as a distinctly non-feminine act.

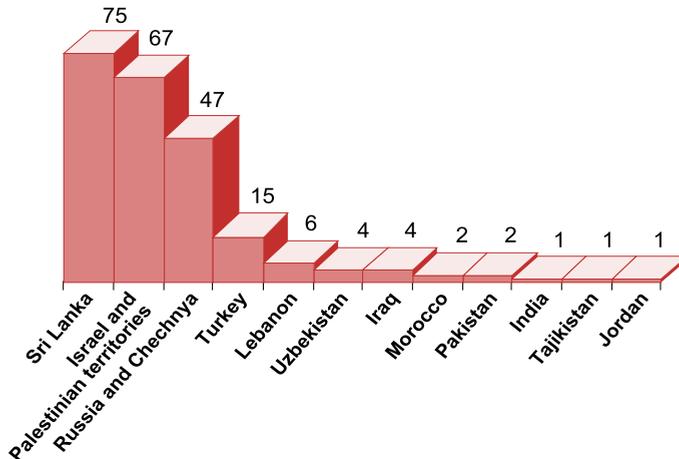
The media's fascination with women suicide bombers is a curious phenomenon. In our contemporary era, one might not expect the excessive attention to female suicide bombers, certainly not when it is not an isolated phenomenon. Moreover, the very participation of women in terrorism and even the phenomenon of women suicide bombers is hardly a recent development. Women have taken part in terror attacks since at least the nineteenth century, and have played a role in the modern terrorism that has gained momentum since the 1960s. Prominent examples include the female participants in the campaign waged by the FLN during the Battle of Algiers in the late 1950s and early 1960s; the terror campaigns of the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany and the Italian Red Brigades in Italy from the 1970s to the mid-1980s; and the Palestinian hijackings at the end of the 1960s to the mid-1970s.

Nor is female participation in suicide bombings a new phenomenon, as women have numbered among its ranks almost since it first appeared in the Middle East in the early 1980s. The first female suicide bomber, Sana Mekhaidali, was sent by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP/PPS) in 1985 and successfully targeted an IDF convoy in Lebanon, killing five soldiers. Dubbed "the bride of the south," her act was followed by five other women dispatched in Lebanon, all acting on behalf of a secular pro-Syrian agenda. Subsequent decades witnessed the spread of female suicide bombers to other areas around the globe. Groups from Sri Lanka, the Palestinian territories, Chechnya, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Iraq, and elsewhere emulated the Lebanese example and operated female suicide bombers

along with their male counterparts. Recent examples of women suicide bombers include a member of TIKKO (the Turkish Workers Villagers Independent Army) who detonated her bomb at the entrance to a mosque in April 2006; a Sri Lankan woman who blew herself up near a Colombian army base on April 25, 2006, wounding the commander of the Sri Lankan armed forces; and Sonja B, a German convert to Islam who was seized in Germany on June 2, 2006 to foil her planned suicide attack in Iraq.

Between 1985 and 2006, there have been more than 220 women suicide bombers (figure 1), representing nearly 15 percent of the overall number of actual suicide bombers around the world and those intercepted in the final stages before the attack. A suicide attack is defined here as a violent, politically motivated action intended consciously and with prior intent – even if thwarted in its final stages – by one or more individuals who kills him/herself in the course of the operation together with his/her chosen target. The guaranteed and preplanned death of the perpetrator is a prerequisite for the operation’s success.<sup>1</sup> The enlistment of women from Belgium, India, Iraq, Turkey, and the West Bank territories for suicide attacks in 2006 indicates that their role continues, and may in fact represent a growing phenomenon.

Yet notwithstanding the familiarity of the phenomenon – or at the very least, its lack of singularity – there seems to have been a disproportionately large interest in women suicide bombers, and the question is why. Certainly the dominance of



**Figure 1.** Female Suicide Bombers, by Targeted Areas, 1985-2006

**Source:** Database compiled by Yoram Schweitzer

traditional gender stereotypes is a factor: despite whatever social and political advances they have made, women are still overwhelmingly regarded as the gentler sex, whose innate maternal nature makes them far less likely candidates for suicide bombers. Their role in the suicide bombing arena has been characterized as shocking, if not outright inconceivable. Since in many cultures women are perceived as the gentle and naive creators of human life, their participation in acts of carnage and devastating pain has aroused a mixture of surprise and repulsion and elevated the level of public interest.

The involvement of women in suicide bombings spawns a host of related questions. Are women's motivations and performances different in comparison to those of their male counterparts? Are they more (or less) determined and dedicated to the cause? Are they more radical or extreme than the men in their perceptions towards the path their struggle has taken? Are they more emotional about it? Do they need a longer or shorter period of preparation for the mission? Are they involved in the operational decision-making process? Do they aspire to be more involved in determining the strategy of their mission?

Examination reveals that despite their high profile, women play a marginal role in their organizations, both numerically and in the corporate structure (even if in some areas such as Turkey they comprised around 40 percent of all the suicide bombers, in Sri Lanka, 20-25 percent, and in Chechnya, 43 percent). They are definitely not the leaders in their organizations, but serve rather as pawns and sacrificial lambs. They are not responsible for the planning of the operations and are actually dispatched to the missions with barely a say as to their targets, the timing of the bombing, and the way the operation should be conducted. For the most part they have not otherwise been trained as fighters, and a suicide mission in itself requires little investment in job training, in terms of either time or money. Indeed, for many of the women, the contribution of a suicide mission to their national or religious struggle is precisely that: a form of employment in the male-dominated domain of suicide bombing.

Furthermore, there are operational exigencies that have dictated the use of female suicide bombers, despite religious or cultural constraints. Women arouse less suspicion and are better able to clear checkpoints and other security obstacles. In addition, they do not have to undergo special training or possess specialized combat skills, and therefore they offer an efficient use of human resources. Moreover, the fact that a woman attracts greater media attention is an asset in and of itself to the organization that sent her. The organization and its particular cause or grievances will almost automatically enjoy greater exposure, which in large measure is an

immediate aim of the bombing itself. In turn, morale and enthusiasm among the rank and file are heightened

These parameters are illustrated by a Fatah operative in charge of a terrorist cell who dispatched two female suicide bombers. He stated that he eventually sent one of them on her mission after rejecting her request several times previously because it was nearly impossible to have a man bypass security arrangements. In the second case, the woman worked with a male partner. As such, she served as both a human bomb and as a cover, lending the two suicide bombers an innocent appearance of a romantic couple. The handler, however, also mentioned his propaganda considerations, knowing his choice of bombers would demonstrate to the Arab world and the world at large that even women are active participants in the Palestinian struggle aspect. Not only did the women arouse the usual excessive media attention, but he noted that there was even a *katsida*, a traditional Islamic ballad, written by a Saudi prince in their honor.<sup>2</sup>

And finally, the question arises: how much is this gender-related phenomenon in fact a function of gender-related issues? More specifically, to what extent is feminism on the agenda of the women themselves or those who send them? Are these bombers in fact dying for equality? Alternatively, is this feminist agenda primarily a Western prism artificially imposed on a non-Western context?

The questions are complicated and multi-dimensional. Female suicide bombers appear almost exclusively in societies that are heavily traditionalist and conservative, where women lack equal rights and their status in society is much lower than that of their male counterparts. In some of the dispatching organizations such as the Kurdish PKK and the Sri Lankan LTTE, leaders promised that women participating in such operations would pave the way for other women to enjoy an equal status and to be emancipated. Although women were already integrated into the army, they did not earn commanding positions, and hence the promise – ultimately empty – of gender advancement for their female colleagues if they volunteered for suicide operations. Thus, those sending the women may be exploiting the modern cry for emancipation of women: proving that women are equally eligible to die alongside men for a nationalist or religious cause ostensibly indicates an equivalency of value.

How much have the women themselves seen their actions as acts of feminism, designed to advance the cause of women's equality in their societies? While operators may have used the bombings to proclaim their would-be progressive gender outlook, do women themselves see their act as their contribution to the feminist cause? Are there feminist overtones, beyond the nationalist / religious motivations? Evidence

suggests that if the women themselves attribute any feminist goals to their actions, this is a rationale imposed after the fact. Far from the primary catalyst that launched them on their mission, advancing gender interests is sometimes an imported cause meant to redeem – if not glorify – the aberration of a female suicide bomber.

Thus, along with a smart utilization of human resources, women's participation in suicide bombings has been used as a propaganda tool by their organizations and served the dispatchers' drive to project an image of participation by all segments of their respective societies in the ethno-national and/or religious struggles. Yet despite the rhetoric and the temporary honor these women enjoy in implementing their tasks, they have not succeeded in promoting any of the egalitarian agendas that hovered around them. Therefore, the concept of dying for equality translates into negative gains on both levels: it was neither achieved nor apparently was it the main purpose of the volunteering participants, albeit it was at times explicitly or implicitly attributed to the deed by those who sent them.

The question of a feminist agenda is a thread that runs throughout the articles below, which deal with women suicide bombers in three conflict arenas: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Russian-Chechen conflict, and the Sri Lankan-Tamil conflict. The collection of articles was launched following a seminar at the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies in May 2005, "Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?" Some of the articles are based on the authors' presentations at the seminar.

Palestinian female suicide bombers are the subject of the first four articles. Not only do they command the interest of analysts in this part of the world, but Israel's media openness has allowed interviews with many unsuccessful women bombers, which provides a unique channel of information. In the opening article, Mira Tzoreff studies the phenomenon of suicide bombing within the context of the Palestinian social agenda, and suggests that suicide bombing may represent a distorted effort by women who differed from the normative Palestinian woman to achieve a legitimate status of their own. In the second article, Yoram Schweitzer cautions against relying on one-time media exposure or quick and short interviews, where packaged answers are spouted by prepared interviewees. Based on his interviews with several dozen jailed women, Schweitzer also argues that while feminist mantras were chanted loudly and proudly after each event by external supporters, they were hardly evident from the beginning. Thus at issue here is the questionable presence of authentic feminist motives, as well as the effort by both the Western press and by the Arab media to use these women as tools for the purposes of their own propaganda.

This divide between Western and Arab portraits of the women and their feminist contribution is documented by Avi Issacharoff. And yet, as Rivka Yadlin shows in the fourth article, what constitutes feminism is in itself open to cultural debate, with many Muslim women rejecting the Western feminist recipe and choosing their own version of feminist expression.

The three other articles in this monograph explore additional aspects within the phenomenon of suicide bombing. Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova study the Black Widows, the suicide bombers who have earned a prominent, albeit hierarchically subordinate, role in Chechnya's terrorism campaign. The fact that their conflict is primarily a nationalist one, rather than a religious one, has certain policy ramifications. In his article on Tamil women suicide bombers, Arjuna Gunawardena suggests that once having become combatants the female Black Tigers are already emancipated to a certain extent, and therefore do not need to die to achieve equality in this respect. However, the women's role in the Tamil national struggle has not bequeathed them with a higher status in the Tamil society. In the final article, Maria Alvanou urges the study of female suicide terrorism through the lens of criminology, which can join gender studies and yield important insight on this phenomenon.

According to conventional wisdom, women as the bearers and nurturers of life lack the natural inclination to carry out violent acts resulting in death. Recent decades have proven that under certain circumstances women can behave and fight in as deadly a fashion as their male counterparts. Whether driven by society, exploited by organizations, or obeying or defying patriarchal norms, the fact remains they are no longer only the mothers of those who dare to give up life killing others; now some, and not even in marginal numbers only, have become emissaries of death.

## Notes

- 1 Based on the definition in Yoram Schweitzer and Shaul Shay, *The Globalization of Terror: The Challenge of Al-Qaida and the Response of the International Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), pp. 154-55.
- 2 Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with A.M., October 26, 2005.

# **The Palestinian *Shahida*: National Patriotism, Islamic Feminism, or Social Crisis**

**Mira Tzoreff**

Is it purely by chance that the phenomenon of Palestinian female suicide bombers occurred only during the height of the second intifada and not at all during the first one? In order to answer this question, two main factors must be considered: developments within the Palestinian national-political arena and gender phenomena in Palestinian society.

It is generally understood that the appearance of the women suicide bombers (*shahidat*) cannot be separated from the internal national-political developments within the Palestinian public during the nearly thirteen years between the outbreak of the first intifada in December 1987 and the eruption of the al-Aqsa intifada in October 2000. However, the most significant period in this respect was actually the seven or eight intervening years, bordered by the end of the first intifada in 1992 and the year preceding the onset of the al-Aqsa intifada in October 2000 – years marked by the evaluation of successes and failures, and of deep moral stocktaking. As to gender-related developments, there are strong claims that the appearance of Palestinian *shahidat* is but one element in the broader spectrum of gender phenomena evident within Palestinian society, both during the intifadas and between them.

At the beginning of the first intifada, the leadership of the Palestinian national movement called upon Palestinian women to take an active part in the national struggle. However, rather than allowing the women to choose how to serve their nation, it urged them to fulfill particular goals – goals that were part and parcel of their gender. One of the obvious duties laid upon them was to become “mothers of the nation.” In one of the intifada leadership’s flyers, Palestinian mothers, sisters, and daughters are described as Palestinian *manabit* – plant nurseries<sup>1</sup> – or as men-producing factories, and the woman’s womb, now “nationalized,” so to speak, was

termed a *batn askari* – a “military womb.”<sup>2</sup> Article 17 of the Hamas charter, published on August 18, 1988, echoes the sentiment: “The Muslim woman has a role in the struggle for liberation that does not fall from that of the man in that she is the one who produces the men.”

Thus, in the framework of the national discourse, women’s contribution to the Palestinian cause was measured by their degree of productivity, in its purest and most basic meaning of re-productivity. This discourse, which turned Palestinian women’s fertility into a nationalist patriotic subject in every way, recycled a similar refrain that had been common in Palestinian newspapers during the 1930s, and especially during the years of the Arab rebellion of 1936–39. At that time it was claimed, *inter alia*, that “the woman who rocks the baby’s cradle with one hand, rocks the nation with the other.”<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the woman who refrains from bearing children harms the nation. Not only did this discourse nationalize the body of every Palestinian woman; it also unequivocally ascribed her place to within the private domain of the home. It predetermined the continuation of her traditional duties of giving birth to, caring for, and educating children, and in doing so, excluded her from what was considered the loftiest possible contribution to the national struggle: participation in military activities against the enemy, which sometimes ended in the sacrifice of one’s life. The danger that she might be killed is inherent in the participation in military actions, and her womb would then no longer be able to serve the nation’s need.

Indeed, the climax of the process of nationalizing motherhood in the first intifada was the bestowal of the exalted status of “Mother of a *Shahid*” upon the Palestinian woman. Whereas their own self-sacrifice was categorically prescribed for them via common Palestinian rhetoric, Palestinian mothers were urged to sacrifice their sons willingly. Moreover, they were expected to do so with equanimity and even with joy. This demand changed Palestinian motherhood into “other mothering.” Official flyers declared: “We salute the Mother of the *Shahid* and we stand at attention to the sound of the joyful ululation (*zaghali*) emitted from her mouth, which she will ululate twice: once on the day that her son leaves to fight and to fall and become a *shahid*, and the day on which the [Palestinian] state will be declared.”<sup>4</sup> The joyful ululation to be voiced by the mothers of *shahids* during their funerals symbolized the public sanction of the link between mother-son/*shahid* and the nation-to-be. The Hamas movement, which wanted to turn this into political capital and Islamicize the intifada according to its goals and needs, created an uncompromising link between the norms of feminine modesty (*‘ard*) and the honor (*ard*) of the national *shahids*. This was the call for women to cover their heads with a scarf, *tahajabi*.<sup>5</sup> Hamas chose the

*tahajabi* as a sign of identification with the sanctified dead sons, and it quickly became a norm, mainly in the Gaza Strip where Hamas was a more dominant force.

The negative imbalance of the uprising for the Palestinians became obvious even during the height of the first intifada, especially after Yasir Arafat sided with Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf War, as a result of which the Palestinians lost the support of the international community. This intifada saw an increase in the number of those killed, injured, imprisoned, and expelled, a greater number of Palestinian homes demolished, and a further decline of the economic situation in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. The general disillusionment escalated following the Oslo accords (September 1993) and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority six months later; there was also more and more violence among the Palestinian populace, more frequent closures of schools, and greater limitations in freedom of movement.

There were several causes for this disillusionment, including revelations of corruption within the Palestinian Authority's leadership. There were also growing realizations that this leadership had failed to establish either the institutions necessary for the imminent Palestinian state or the infrastructures for education, health, and welfare services, or even workplaces that would relieve the Palestinians' dependence on Israel for jobs. All of these, separately and together, ate away at the feeling of solidarity and led to the erosion of the readiness among Palestinian women to adhere to the tasks designed for them by their leadership. This was expressed in 1995 by Suha Barghouti of the Institute of Women Studies at Birzeit University in the following way:

In the past, sectarian divisions prevailed amongst us . . . nevertheless, we had many common denominators because of our clear-cut attitude regarding the struggle against the occupation. At present, our shared political and national interests have decreased significantly and the situation that has been created is one of deadlock and controversy.<sup>6</sup>

The climax of the situation described above found its expression in the al-Aqsa intifada, which lacked the widespread enthusiasm and support of the first one: it had been forced upon the populace in order to divert attention from the failures of the first intifada and to plant new hopes within the general public.

Along with the differences in the situation that prevailed in October 2000 compared to that of 1992, there was the concomitant steady (if slow) decline in the readiness of Palestinian women to bear the full weight of the national goals imposed upon them. The agenda of this intifada thus included three characteristics that

differed from those of the first one: a gender-oriented (feminist) social agenda as an alternative to the national agenda of the hegemonic male-dominated leadership; an alternative motherhood, along with the previous recruited national motherhood; and the phenomenon of women suicide bombers (*shahidat*).

The first signs of gender discourse had already begun to appear in 1992. The women who took part in it were adamant in bringing discussions regarding gender and social issues to the forefront of the national discourse, even at the cost of outright confrontation with the Palestinian leadership – which preferred to marginalize any discussion of social issues, including those regarding women. As far as elevating the national struggle above the social one, the women’s earlier forgiving tone was replaced by a still apologetic but now defiant and even challenging one. Representative of this is an article written by Ilham abu Ghazalla, also of Birzeit University, which appeared on November 1, 1992 in the Jerusalem-based newspaper *al-Quds*. The title of the article was “*al-Maraah wal-Watan Yakun Takun*,” translated here very freely as, “As its women, so too the homeland.” Underlying the article is the author’s claim that the national struggle has only a meager chance to succeed unless the social struggle is promoted:

Due to the intifada many groups have come to understand that there cannot be a successful national struggle without an open-minded and creative young generation, [and] without workers free of deprivation. Women have also realized that the homeland is not only the ground itself, but those that live on it. For how can a person whose society oppresses him defend it and his country? Our women have begun to realize that family sorrow upon the birth of a girl directly affects the life of that girl as she grows up and when she becomes a woman – a woman constrained by dictates of attire and social behavior whenever she leaves her home: studies, work, social life, reading of books, finding a husband – she may not, she can not, initiate anything. And a nation half of whose population is shackled – how will it become liberated?<sup>7</sup>

One notable event in this direction was the August 1994 signing of an accord that united all of the women’s organizations that had arisen in the occupied territories as of the late 1980s. These included the various centers for women’s issues in Nablus, Jerusalem, and Gaza, and the Center for Legal and Social Counseling. The accord called for the removal of the obstacles blocking the way for the equalization of the status of Palestinian women with that of Palestinian men and was heralded by the slogan, “There can be no democracy without women’s representation.”<sup>8</sup>

An immediate step in this direction, initiated by the women's umbrella organization, was the establishment of a shadow parliament whose role was to formulate a social and gender-oriented agenda. In a newspaper interview in September 1994, upon the occasion of the establishment of this parliament, Eileen Kuttab, the head of the Ramallah-based Bisan Center for Research and Development of Palestinian Society, stated the following:

The issue of the woman [in Palestinian society] is a purely social issue, and the role of non-government organizations is to work together as a group to put pressure on the Palestinian Authority to adopt the issue of civil rights – as a strategy – but, along with this, these organizations must also propel the society forward towards democracy. Our goal is to cause a change in the status of women as a guarantee for civil equality. And since the Palestinian women's umbrella organization is a non-government organization, it should be the one to put this process in motion.<sup>9</sup>

That same year, at the initiative of the Center for Legal Assistance for Women in Jerusalem and al-Haq, a Palestinian organization for civil rights, a congress dealing with women, justice, and legislation was convened. At the congress concrete demands were made for changes in the personal status law regarding the status of women, one of which was to raise the age of marriage for girls to eighteen. (This demand was based on statistics gathered by the Center for Women's Issues in Gaza, which indicated that 41.8 percent of the girls in the areas of the Palestinian Authority were between the ages of 12–17 when they were married.) Other demands included repealing the laws allowing *talaq* divorce (unilateral repudiation of a wife by her husband) and the concomitant transfer of the divorce procedure to the civil courts, and the cessation of polygamy.<sup>10</sup>

These organizations were not content with sterile theoretical discussions for changes at some indefinite future time, but were active in the field, where they offered women advice in such matters as family planning, childrearing, and integration in the workforce. The Islamic organizations did not allow this to go on without responses of their own, and within one year (1997–98) two organizations of Islamic women appeared, al-Huda and al-Khansa, each of which presented a platform that shaped the secular feminists' gender demands according to the commandments and laws of Islam.<sup>11</sup>

The peak of this process was reflected by an outpouring of women's achievements in cultural matters, this in the heat of the most critical period of the al-Aqsa intifada.

For example, in October 2002, at the initiative of Fikra, a Gaza cultural association, an original play *al-Sayyd Perfect* ("Mister Perfect") was staged and performed in Gaza City. The play, written by the twenty-nine year old Palestinian playwright 'Aatef Abu Sayf, deals with the phenomenon of violence in all of its forms in Palestinian society, but especially with the status of divorced women and society's attitude to them. Engagement in the knotty question of divorced women reflects a real crisis that Palestinian society was undergoing, a crisis borne out by data presented by Mona al-Shawa, the head of the Center for Civil Rights in the city of Gaza. For example, in 2001, when 1427 couples ended their relationships with divorce, most of the women were unable to bring their cases before the *shari'a* courts because they could not afford the financial cost of arguing for their legal rights as divorcees, among them to be awarded custody of their children. The play crossed virtually all possible red lines: from the very matter of the discussion of so sensitive a subject during the political whirlwind in which Palestinian society and its leadership were swept up; through the prominent dominance of the fundamentalist Islamic movements in the Gaza Strip; through the fact that the cast of the play were all women, this in a patriarchal society in which such a vocation, or even avocation, is considered taboo; and, finally, that the target audience of the play were high school students – "boys and girls in whom the play would awaken doubts," and preferably sooner than later, according to the playwright:

I do not believe that we must wait for the end of the occupation; on the contrary, we have to discuss internal-social issues – for such discussion is necessary for the continued existence of our society. The occupation is no more than an excuse to postpone such a discussion to a later stage, if at all.<sup>12</sup>

The second gender phenomenon witnessed during the al-Aqsa intifada was the flourishing of a different kind of motherhood than the earlier "mobilized motherhood." During this uprising, Palestinian mothers expressed their fierce opposition to losing their sons for the sake of the homeland, even if the deaths turned the sons into *shahids* and themselves into Mothers of *Shahids*. They wanted their sons alive, and at their sides. They expressed their feelings in a series of interviews that were reported in the London-based weekly newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat* of December 28, 2000. The voices of the mother of Isma'il, the mother of Samir, and the mother of Maher themselves were heard, and not the voices of designated spokesmen. The interviewed women came from all strata of the population; some were well-educated and spoke fluently and coherently, while others were poorly educated and their language was faulty

and lacking. However, there was one common denominator: a perception of self as the birth-mother of her own, biological son, in which capacity she – the birth-mother – would do anything to protect her son from becoming a *shahid*. Mothers who failed in this renounced the title Mother of the *Shahid* and declared themselves “bereaved mothers” (*thukal’a*). In this vein, grief and mourning gradually replaced the mother of the *shahid*’s publicly expressed joy: “If only I was a mother, simply a mother and not the Mother of the *Shahid*,”<sup>13</sup> or, “I wanted to be a mother that no one knows, an anonymous (*nakira*) mother.”<sup>14</sup> Support groups for mothers suffering from the trauma of having lost a son began to be active during the second intifada, and this allowed women to express their grief despite the patriarchal proscription that tried to stifle this sentiment: “I was forbidden to kiss him and to weep over him; the sheikh told me that my tears would cause him pain and defile him.”<sup>15</sup> Most of the women expressed their longing to see their sons: “I couldn’t sleep during the entire past month. Today I visited his grave and I called out to him, ‘Arise, awaken, son; don’t remain there buried under the earth.’” Or, “I don’t want a son who is a hero; I want my son back again. He is mine!”<sup>16</sup>

The process of the privatization of motherhood was accompanied by trenchant criticism of the Palestinian leaders who, while exhorting the sacrifice of the nation’s sons, did their utmost to keep their own sons safe from all and any dangers. “Is the Palestinian Authority aware of the pain and suffering I am going through? Does any one of them realize what it means for a mother to sleep in her bed while her son is buried under stones in an ugly graveyard?”<sup>17</sup> asked the mother of Ryyad defiantly. The voices of these Palestinian mothers thus express the process of privatization, from the nationalized motherhood that prevailed and had exhausted itself in the first intifada, to individualized motherhood that, step by step, separates itself from national responsibility.

The third prominent gender-related dimension to the al-Aqsa intifada was the appearance of the *shahidat* – young women suicide bombers – a phenomenon that was glorified but, conversely, also demonized. On January 27, 2002, Wafa Idris blew herself up on a main street in Jerusalem. While much has been written explaining her deed ideologically, testimony of her friends and family strongly suggests that the motivation for her suicide was personal rather than national or religious: Wafa Idris was twenty-five years old, divorced by her husband (who was also her cousin) after some eight or nine years during which she failed to bring offspring into the world. Her status as a divorced and barren woman, and her return as a dependant to her parents’ home where she became an economic burden, put her in what is a

dead end situation in a traditional, patriarchal society. She was non-normative in Palestinian society and her chances of building a new life for herself were close to zero. Wafa Idris's only way of redeeming herself from the inferior status ordained by her surroundings was by choosing to become a *shahida* for the sake of her nation.

Idris was the pioneer; others followed soon after. In February 2002, Darin Abu Issa, a twenty-two year old student from a village near Nablus blew herself up at the Maccabim roadblock. Abu Issa, after having been divorced by her husband, was a student at al-Najah University in Nablus, where she was a member of the Islamic Students Union. According to Palestinian sources, her former husband and her brother had both been killed in a clash with Israeli military forces just months after her divorce, and this is what motivated her to become a *shahida*. After Hamas rejected her request to carry out a suicide bombing, PLO activists from the Balata refugee camp near Nablus granted it.

Hanadi Garedat, a young lawyer from a village in the Jenin area who carried out a suicide attack in a crowded restaurant in Haifa in October 2003, represents a different sub-group of women suicide bombers. At the age of twenty-seven and still unmarried, Garedat was in an untenable position in a society that sanctifies marriage. Her non-normative status exposed her to its supervisory apparatus, which refused to recognize her as an educated and economically independent woman, and continued to scrutinize her every move, especially her sexual behavior. Becoming a *shahida* rescued her from the lifelong spinsterhood dictated by her advanced age. Moreover, it bestowed upon her the title "Bride of Haifa," for as a *shahida* she has been, as it were, married to the soil of Haifa, while prior to this it was only the male *shahid* who in his death wedded the soil of the homeland. This title represents the feminization of the national metaphoric conjugal bond: the soil of Haifa is the substitute for a flesh and blood husband in Hanadi Garedat's unrealized marriage.

Women like Idris, Abu Issa, and Garedat were easy targets for recruiters who preferred childless divorced or separated young women, or unwed and apparently "unbetrotable" women.

Another sub-group comprises much younger women who carried out suicide acts after they were seduced by Tanzim activists and, whether or not they had become pregnant, whose virtue was suspect. They had violated the norms of honor and modesty dictated by their society's mechanism of supervision – namely, rumor and gossip, *kalam al-nas*. They had lost their own honor and had betrayed that of their families – and only by their deaths could the honor of both be regained. Becoming *shahidat* and national heroines could achieve this, as well as expiation for themselves

and an upgrading of their own and their families' social status. Thus, Aayat al-Ahras, an eighteen year old excellent high school student from the Deheishe refugee camp not far from Bethlehem, and Andleeb Takatka, a twenty-one year old student at Bethlehem University, both carried out suicide bombings in Jerusalem, the first in March 2002, the second the following month. Although through their behavior they had defiled their families' honor (*'ard*), which could lead only to social death, both – by self-sacrifice through suicide, *istishhad* – escaped the humiliating deaths they would otherwise have suffered.

Among the women who attempted to carry out suicide acts but were apprehended en route is another set of non-normative women. Such for example was Faiza 'Amal Juma'a, an unmarried thirty-five year old woman from the 'Askar refugee camp near Nablus, who was known as Ahmad. She was one of those called *mutarajilla*, manly-women. "Only God knows whether I am really Faiza, as is written in my identity card, or Ahmad, which is who I feel I am."<sup>18</sup> Faiza-Ahmad's fate was sealed, as she herself was well aware: "Who will want to marry someone like me? Have you forgotten that I am Ahmad?" Even Faiza's brother-in-law recognized her predicament – "I feel pity for her" – and admitted that her trans-sexuality was exploited by her recruiters: "Evil people used her personal problem and sent her to put an end to her life." Women such as Faiza neither have the necessary funds to pay for a sex change operation nor, even if they do and have such an operation, will they be accepted in their society, in which there is no freedom of choice. She was expected to resign herself to her God-given female sexuality, and to live according to it. Unable to do this, the only way for Faiza-Ahmad to redress her sin of refusing to do so was by death as a *shahida*.

An intensification of the *shahidat* phenomenon is represented by the suicide of Rim Riashi at the Erez check post, not only as the married mother of two small children, but also because of the sanction she received by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin. Yassin had previously ruled that "in our society there is a tendency among women to cleave to Jihad and holy death, but the woman is unique and at this time, we have no need of acts of suicide by women; ensuring the nation's existence is important many times over."<sup>19</sup> At the same time, unofficial sources confirmed that he would sanction suicide actions by women who had stained their family honor. Indeed, it was not long before it became clear that Rim Riashi had requested Yassin's sanction only after her relationship with a lover had, via *kalam al-nas* (gossip), become a known matter. Thus, the act of *istishhad* was the only way to remove the stain of dishonor from both herself and her family.

Both the Palestinian national leadership and the Islamic movements' women recruiters made cynical use of the suicides of young Palestinian women. The former tried to embellish them with a feminist slant by presenting the phenomenon as evidence of the trend towards equality insofar as Palestinian patriotism was concerned, a subject that permeated the national discourse. Thus, for example, in a eulogy at the funeral of Wafa Idris: "The martyrdom of the 'flower Wafa' proves that all sectors of our people, men and women, side by side, are joined together in the war of liberation and in the confrontation with the aggression."<sup>20</sup> A female member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council went even further and determined that "Wafa's martyrdom has restored honor to the national role of the Palestinian woman; [she] has presented us with one of the most awe-inspiring portrayals in the long struggle for national liberation."<sup>21</sup>

The Islamic movements adopted a similar claim but dressed the women suicides in a cloak of authentic Islamic feminism and claimed that women were permitted to take an active part in a jihad. To validate this they brought a *hadith* (a saying that is not in the Qur'an but is attributed to the Prophet Mohammed): "If even one centimeter of Muslim soil is conquered, then all are commanded to take part in a jihad: a child without his father's permission, a woman without her husband's permission, and a slave without his owner's permission." Basing herself on this *hadith*, Jamilla Shanti, in charge of recruiting women for the Islamic Jihad movement, has claimed that "there is no difference between the martyrdom of the Muslim sisters and that of the Muslim brothers."<sup>22</sup> We are witnessing a process in which the Islamic term *shahid/shahida* itself is undergoing a process of nationalization and Palestine-ization. And in this way, the Islamic "holy war for the sake of Allah" [*jihad fi sabil 'allah*] is being turned into an Islamic "holy war for the sake of the homeland" [*jihad fi sabil al watan*].

And yet, neither Islamic rhetoric nor nationalistic eloquence has succeeded to date in proving that the phenomenon of *istishhad*, self-sacrifice in the name of Allah, is truly a matter of gender equality. And if the question we are trying to clarify is whether the *shahidat* are dying for equality, the answer is yes, very much so – but they are dying to *be* equal, through the living of their lives and not through the sanctification of their deaths.

## Notes

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- 4 Massad, "Gender and Palestinian Nationalism."
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- 11 Islah Jad, Penny Johnson, and Rita Giacaman, "Transit Citizens: Gender and Citizenship under the Palestinian Authority," in Suad Joseph (ed.), *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 150.
- 12 Orli Halperin, "Feminism Gaza Style," *Haaretz*, October 22, 2002.
- 13 Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Liberating Voices: The Political Implications of Palestinian Mothers Narrating their Loss," *Women's Studies International Forum* 26, no. 5 (2003): 397.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., p. 398.
- 18 Smadar Perry, "A Terrorist Woman Suicide Bomber," *Yediot Ahronot*, June 18, 2004.
- 19 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 31, 2002.
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- 21 Ibid.
- 22 *Al-Sha'ab*, February 1, 2002.



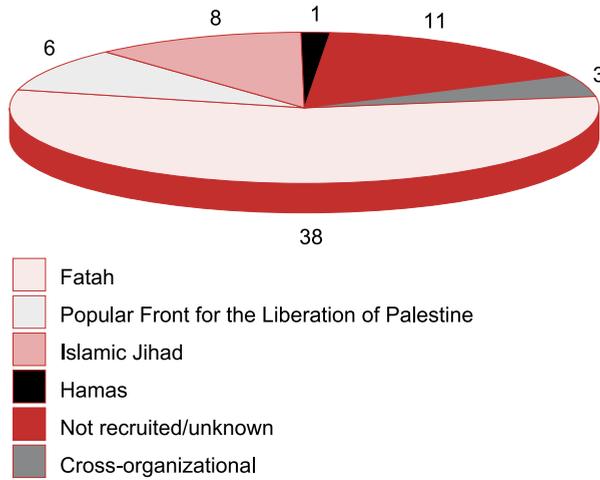
# **Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Reality vs. Myth**

**Yoram Schweitzer**

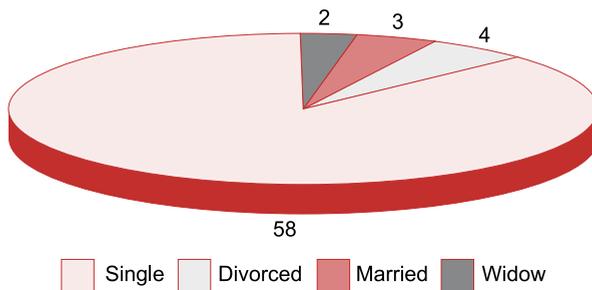
On January 27, 2002, a terrorist bomb exploded in the handbag of Wafa Idris, a woman in her late twenties, on Jaffa Street in Jerusalem. The bomb killed Idris herself and an Israeli citizen, and wounded approximately fifty people. Idris, cast by the media as the first female Palestinian terrorist, was not intended to kill herself with her victims, according to the original plan of those who sent her. For some unknown reason, however, the bomb went off unexpectedly.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, as part of the suicide terrorist cult that was greatly strengthened in Palestinian society during the al-Aqsa intifada, Idris was crowned a hero throughout the entire Arab world and was portrayed as a symbol of the new Muslim feminism. She became famous as a noble and heroic expression of the collective desire of Muslim women in general, and of Palestinian women in particular, to enlist in the struggle against the enemies of the nation of Islam, chief among them Israel.<sup>2</sup>

The cult fostered by the Arab media around the image of Idris and the expressions of identification with her among the Palestinians have created a new model for Palestinian girls and women, as well as for Muslim women beyond the theater of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seeking to follow the same path.<sup>3</sup> Thus, between Wafa Idris's action in January 2002 and the end of May 2006, sixty-seven Palestinian women were counted as planning to carry out suicide attacks (figure 1). Eight of the women blew themselves up; of these, five of the women were sent by the Fatah organization, two by Islamic Jihad in Palestine, and one by Hamas. The other women were arrested at the attacks' various stages of planning.

Most of the women (58 percent) were unmarried, and many were in their early twenties (figure 2). Thirty-nine percent were in the 18-25 age bracket, 16 percent were in the 26-35 age bracket, and 11 percent were under eighteen (figure 3). Almost half were educated: 22 percent had more than a high school education and 26 percent had



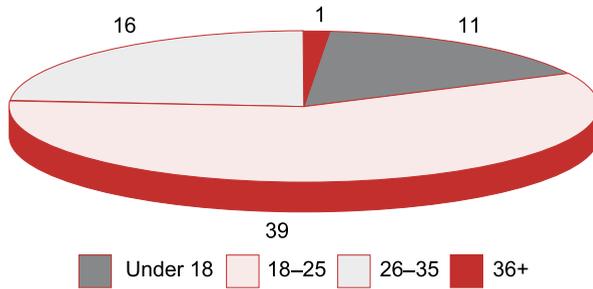
**Figure 1.** Female Suicide Terrorists: Organizational Affiliation



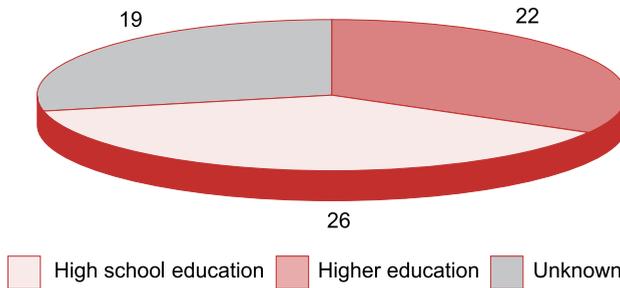
**Figure 2.** Female Suicide Terrorists: Marital Status

a high school education and were qualified for non-skilled labor (figure 4). Others were very young women with no high school education or profession.<sup>4</sup>

The highly emotional parades in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in memory of the female suicide terrorists who blew themselves up, together with hymns of praise for them in the Arab media, have created the impression in the global media that the female suicide terrorists were a band of independent women, fully aware of what they were doing, who were trying to take an active and equal part in the armed struggle and were fully supported by Palestinian society, as well as elsewhere. The question arises whether this one-dimensional image portrayed in the media is grounded in fact. Or, does a gap exist between the myth surrounding female Palestinian suicide



**Figure 3.** Female Suicide Terrorists: Breakdown by Age



**Figure 4.** Female Suicide Terrorists: Education Level

terrorists and the personal and social reality in which they operated, which may have pushed many of them into volunteering for their missions.

The large number of imprisoned female Palestinian suicide terrorists, compared with the number under arrest in other places around the world, has created a demand for interviews with them among those wishing to study the motivation of female suicide terrorists. Israel’s policy of media openness has acknowledged the fascination with the phenomenon of female suicide terrorists and made possible many interviews with those who did not complete their missions. These interviews with the women themselves have provided a critical dimension beyond the posthumous hype surrounding the women who blew themselves up. The interviews have thus constituted a key resource for drawing conclusions and attempting to understand the global phenomenon of female suicide terrorism.

I have conducted many personal interviews<sup>5</sup> and conversations with Palestinian male and female political prisoners, including intended suicide terrorists and those who sent them, about their motives and the background to their actions. In the course of

these conversations, their position concerning the involvement of Palestinian women in suicide terrorist attacks was examined specifically. In contrast to the enthusiasm with which they defended the right and duty of men to volunteer for actions against Israel, a decisive majority of the men interviewed by me contended that there was no need to employ women as suicide terrorists, and expressed opposition to women's involvement in this type of action. Their opposition was not due to a principled moral denial of the religious and national right of women to carry out the action. It mostly reflected their fear of possibly degrading of the honor of Palestinian women, which as such would be personally damaging to their honor as men. The principal anxiety concerning the honor of women lay in the conditions of their imprisonment, interrogation by men, body searches, improper language about them and in their presence, and so forth. Those interviewed expressed concern about insensitive Israeli behavior towards all Palestinian women and lack of proper consideration for their honor in the future. It was also asserted that there were enough men to carry out the work, and that there was no need for women to do it for them.

This dissenting opinion is also reflected in the stance of the Palestinian organizations, which for a long time refrained from employing women as suicide terrorists. In the first wave of thirty-eight suicide terrorist attacks by Hamas and Islamic Jihad during the Oslo process in 1993-2000, all the perpetrators were men. When the al-Aqsa intifada broke out, the organizations' reservations about sending women began to moderate, but the operational change occurred only fifteen months after this intifada began. The first to include women in suicide terrorist attacks was Fatah in early 2002, followed by Islamic Jihad and finally Hamas, which was "forced reluctantly" to surrender to difficult field conditions and individual operational considerations in getting through Israeli roadblocks.

Nasser Shawish<sup>6</sup> of Fatah was personally involved in sending three suicide terrorists, including a woman named Dareen Abu Aisha. Shawish reiterated during all my conversations with him that in principle he opposed sending women, and had even continuously tried to persuade Abu Aisha to abandon her determination to carry out a suicide mission: "I felt that she was a pretty and successful girl studying at the university, a future mother, who should marry and bear children, and help her people in other ways. But she wouldn't stop pressuring me." With Obeyda, his fiancée and Dareen's best friend, he tried to dissuade Dareen from carrying out the suicide attack and thereby protect her. For her part, Dareen threatened Shawish that unless he helped her become a *shahida*, she would buy a knife, go kill soldiers at a roadblock, and die that way. Shawish eventually changed his stance in this specific

case, after his closest friend, Muhanad Abu Haliwa, was killed and, he said, after he witnessed the killing of the family of wanted terrorist Nabil Quake in Ramallah when they were hit by a missile fired at his car. These events pushed him into surrendering to her entreaties. "I looked for vengeance, and I wanted it to be special. Enough! I felt that a woman would be able to carry out this special attack that we planned more easily, and pass through the roadblocks, because of her innocent appearance."<sup>7</sup>

Sharif, a Fatah operative responsible for sending the terrorist who perpetrated the attack on the Seafood Market Restaurant in Tel Aviv (which the Palestinians consider to be a suicide terrorist attack with light weaponry), said in an interview that he had also been asked at some point to send women on suicide missions. He said that in principle he had opposed sending women. He commented on both the practical side, and the limitations in sending women. He was asked to arrange a safe house for women who had volunteered to carry out suicide terrorist attacks, so that they would not be seen in public before they were sent. Though he arranged the safe house as requested, he did not want to deal with them, because he was afraid of what would be said about him as a single man entering an apartment together with two women. He was concerned that the good name of his family would also be affected, and was particularly anxious about the reactions of the families of the girls, who would have held him responsible for sending their daughters.<sup>8</sup>

Abd al-Raouf Kawasme, a failed Hamas suicide terrorist from a group of soccer players on a Hebron team who volunteered as a group to carry out suicide terrorist attacks also expressed opposition to the involvement of women in this type of activity "because there are enough men who will do it, and this is men's work. Women should concentrate on social and other activity."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in interviews I conducted with Hamas members, they all expressed unequivocal opposition to the involvement of women. In support of their view, they said that their organization had not sent women as suicide terrorists, except for the case of Rim Riashi, which they did not regard as a change in policy by the organization but as a "temporary constraint of tough reality on the ground." A Hamas prisoner from the Gaza Strip expressed strong opposition to his organization's sending of Riashi, a mother of two small children. In a moment of candor, he confessed that as asserted by Israel, he had heard from trusted sources from his hometown that Riashi had had an affair with a senior Hamas operative, and expressed horror that matters had deteriorated to the point where people in his organizations were having intimate relations with a married woman and sending her to blow herself up.

It should be emphasized that most of those interviewed did not dispute the right of any Palestinian to act in defense of his or her people. To them, however, the correct way for women to act was different – not through suicide terrorist attacks. Interestingly, this included many who opposed sending women on suicide missions but nonetheless claimed that they saw no difference in principle between male and female suicide terrorists. Some had themselves sent women on such missions. Amjad Ubeidi is an Islamic Jihad senior operative responsible for sending Nihadi Jardat on October 4, 2004 on an attack against the Maxim restaurant in Haifa, which killed twenty-one people and wounded fifty, in revenge for the death of her fiancé and his best friend. He claimed that he had tried to persuade her not to go on the mission, but that her determination and reasons for carrying it out had convinced him to help her.<sup>10</sup> In an interview broadcast by al-Jazeera, Ubeidi proclaimed that “in our society, the death of a son is much more difficult for the parents than the death of a daughter. The grief for the loss of ten daughters will not match the grief of the loss of one boy, because his role in society is much greater.”<sup>11</sup> In a later interview he clarified his statement as referring specifically to a bomber’s family that lost the only son it had, with no implication that girls are worth less than boys.

Muatez Haimouni, who sent Andalib Taqtaqah to the Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem where she killed six people and wounded dozens more (on April 12, 2004), also claimed that in his view, there was no difference between men and women as suicide terrorists. He said that the combination of the woman’s determination to volunteer for the mission and the urgent operational need to strike against Israelis, which for tactical purposes required the use of a woman instead of a man in order to bypass obstacles, had convinced him to send her without hesitation. Loyal to his purportedly egalitarian stance, Haimouni also recruited an Israeli Arab girl to assist in the plot following a friendship/romance they developed over the internet.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond these observations, special insights are gleaned from the disclosures of the women themselves. Presented below are interviews with three female suicide terrorists who were caught before they carried out their plans. Two of the women were en route to their target, and a third was arrested at home a short time before going into action. The three women were young and unmarried, aged twenty to twenty-six. They related different and sometimes contradictory versions of their motives and the circumstances in which they volunteered for their missions.

The specific women have been portrayed here because they granted a number of interviews at different times, some public and some personal, to various people from the media and to academic researchers. In contrast to the interviews with

people from the media, the conversations with academics were conducted as personal conversations and included a number of meetings. Predictably, the media interviews were of a more declarative character and were filled with outspokenly nationalistic and sometimes also religious messages that they or their organizations wished to deliver to viewers and readers. Such messages were not completely absent from the personal interviews, but the number, length, and context of the messages differed. More personal aspects also emerged in the one-on-one interviews, which helped clarify some missing particulars that were obscured by all the nationalist pronouncements. These aspects made it clear that their motives were more complex than those outwardly declared.

Most prominent was the women's contradictory versions of their stories, and the general effect that collective time with fellow political prisoners had on their autobiographies. This aspect emerged especially in the personal interviews but in some of the media interviews as well, conducted in the earlier stages of their imprisonment, before they were briefed by their domineering cellmates. In these personal interviews, the women expressed a strong feeling that their difficult personal situation had been exploited to lead them to volunteer for their mission, without their having fully thought through the deed they planned to commit. In contrast, personal remarks were generally absent from the media interviews conducted with them after they had already spent time in prison. The latter interviews were primarily products of an indoctrination process, formal or informal, in prison. They bore a dominant nationalistic character, and reflected the uniform dogmatic messages that the organizations wished to deliver.

### **Thouria Khamour**

Thouria Khamour, born in 1976, lived in Jba in the Jenin area. She was arrested on May 19, 2002, one day before she planned to leave to carry out a suicide terrorist attack in Jerusalem. She was arrested at home, before embarking on the mission she had volunteered for two weeks previously.

Thouria was interviewed a number of times in 2002-4. In these interviews, she gave different versions of her motives and the way she was recruited for her mission. As more time passed in prison, she changed her description of the circumstances under which she volunteered and the motives she declared. She recast herself from a girl whose personal motives dominated to a flag bearer for the Palestinian and Islamic national struggle against the Zionist enemy.

The first interview took place ten days after her arrest. She said that she had volunteered for the mission out of personal motives, explaining, "sometimes a person is subject to such great pressure and mental distress that it leads to an explosion." Thouria said that she had volunteered for the operation mostly because of rejection by society and her family's objections to a man who wished to marry her. She claimed that she had in any case never intended to carry out the mission. "I regretted it," she said, and gave three reasons for her decision that she would not act. "I began to think that I was killing people, babies, women, and sick people, and to imagine my family sitting in a restaurant, and someone blowing them up," she explained. As another reason, she said that she feared "that God would not regard it (her personal circumstances) as a worthy motive, and would therefore not consider her a *shahida*." The most significant reason she gave, however, was the order that her handlers gave her that she must blow herself up in any event, even if it was not in the middle of a mass of people. "I felt that they were trading in the blood of *shahids*," she stated.<sup>13</sup>

In other conversations in prison with an academic researcher, Thouria talked about the personal problems that had led her to take her life into her hands. "I was 25 years old, unmarried, and my situation at home wasn't good. At age seventeen, I already tried to harm myself twice, but they stopped me."<sup>14</sup> According to her account, at age twenty, after looking for personal and social fulfillment, and after her parents rebuked her for the way she dressed and her tomboyish behavior and warned her that she would be unable to find a husband, "I started returning to religion, wearing traditional clothing, and behaving like a girl. I very much wanted to get married."<sup>15</sup>

She stayed in school only until the tenth grade. She was a mediocre student, and did not continue her studies. She went to work, but did not apply herself there and changed jobs several times. Due to her unstable way of life, her family considered her a weak and difficult person who should be watched carefully so that she would not dishonor her family. When she finally found a prospective groom to share a new life with her, a man who was disabled, and the two agreed to marry, her family strongly opposed the match because of his disability and because of a disagreement over the price that the groom's family would have to pay to her father. As a result, the marriage was called off. Thouria related that the young man had been her only chance of getting married, which her father had destroyed, and that she had therefore decided to take revenge on him by becoming a *shahida*. From this point, the road to her assignment to a suicide mission was short. She met with a young man she knew to be a recruiter of suicide terrorists. Through him, she began a process that

was interrupted with her arrest by the Israeli security forces upon their receipt of intelligence information. "The minute I decided to become a suicide terrorist, I knew that I had to do it. Perhaps then my father would have understood me... they used me... I'm so sorry."<sup>16</sup>

In a later interview granted to *Maariv* magazine in September 2004, after spending a long time in prison with her cellmates, a more belligerent Thouria appeared, telling a completely different and altruistic story, with no trace of personal motives. She said that the main theme of her life was the struggle against Israeli occupation. She declared that she had volunteered for her mission

because I wanted to become a *shahida* and sacrifice myself for Palestine by killing many Jews... I calculated how many Jews I should kill for it to be considered a success, and for it to be worth my death. How many? As many as possible – wherever there was a crowd... I closed my eyes, and dreamed of injuring more than 100 or 200 Jews. A large number. I thought only of that. To sacrifice myself, and that hundreds of Jews would die.

She later explained that although as a Muslim she knew that there were four acts forbidden by her religion (uproot a tree, kill a child, kill an old person, and kill a woman),

the Jewish baby who would have died in the attack would become a soldier tomorrow, and would do what your soldiers are doing now. He would murder Palestinians and occupy Palestine, so I felt comfortable with the decision I finally made, that I was going to do something good for the fatherland. It wasn't something I did spontaneously; it came after long thought. I was proud of myself, because it required a lot of willpower. It wasn't easy to make such a decision, but my faith in God and my love for Palestine and Jerusalem helped me.

She finished on a selfless, socially conscious note: "I asked that if I succeeded in carrying out my mission, my reward would go to Palestinian orphans. I wanted to sacrifice myself for my country and God."<sup>17</sup>

In an interview that she granted to the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* in September 2004, Thouria portrayed herself as a fearless warrior who initiated the terrorist attack and collected intelligence for it before joining the Tanzim members who planned to send her on the mission. She said that she had turned to them only because she needed a sponsor. She attributed her volunteering for the mission to her

family who had educated her “to oppose the occupation,” and to the humiliation that her father had undergone at the hands of the Israeli army. Thouria described the preparations for the missions, which amounted to a conversation in which her seriousness was evaluated, and forty-five minutes of instruction about how to activate the bomb in the bag that she was to have carried. She said, “I began to feel close to the Garden of Eden, and that the belt with which I had practiced [before she was given the bomb-filled bag] had become part of my body.” Later in the interview she said that her forthcoming marriage had been deliberately calculated because she had wanted to mislead the Israelis and not be suspected by them, as somebody who is engaged doesn’t volunteer for this kind of operation.

Thouria’s interviews demonstrate in an extreme way the phenomenon of female suicide terrorists undergoing indoctrination in prison. During their imprisonment, they construct, accept, or adapt the national and religious narrative, and shape their story to explain their motives for volunteering for their missions. Sometimes, they go from personal explanations for suicide terrorism to adopting national and religious explanations, full of altruism and heroism against a demonized enemy, whose deeds justify every kind of action, including indiscriminate murder of innocent people.

### **Arin Ahmad**

Arin Ahmad, unmarried and a resident of Beit Sakhour, was arrested on the way to a suicide terrorist attack in Rishon LeZion in 2002, when she was twenty years old. Arin volunteered to take part in a double suicide terrorist attack in Rishon LeZion, but at the last minute, when she was near the target, she decided that she did not want to carry it out. She returned to her handlers and demanded that they bring her back to her home, despite efforts by the person who brought her to the scene to persuade her to persist in her mission. Another person sent with her on the same suicide mission blew himself up. Arin said that he too had regretted taking on the mission, and had returned to the man who accompanied them to their target. In contrast to her, however, he was eventually persuaded to complete the mission.

The first formal report in which Arin told about her action took place during a visit to the prison by then-Minister of Defense Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who asked to meet suicide terrorists who had survived in order to understand their motives. In a conversation with him, Arin expressed her concern about what was in store for her, following what she termed “a momentary fall.” She claimed in her defense that she had retracted her intention in the moment of truth.<sup>18</sup> In answer to the minister’s question why she had wanted to carry out a suicide terrorist attack and whether she

had been religiously motivated, she said that her motive was personal. The Israelis had killed the man who had been her boyfriend for a year and a half. "I was in distress, and I was depressed," she said.<sup>19</sup> When asked what she wanted to happen and whether she had wanted to kill Jews in order to avenge the death of her boyfriend, she answered, "I don't know what I wanted. I was hurt and angry. I have many friends from the university who are active in Fatah Tanzim. We sat together one evening, and they talked about how they wanted to organize revenge for the operations that Israelis were carrying out in the territories. I sat and listened in silence, and thought about Jad, my boyfriend, and I suddenly told them, 'You know what? I'm going to carry out a suicide terrorist attack, and that's that.' A minute before that, I hadn't thought of such a thing."<sup>20</sup> Arin assumed that the process of volunteering would take a long time, during which they would gradually prepare her for the mission. Instead, however, the process moved ahead at a dizzying pace. After only four days, they called her up, blessed her, and told her that the organization had approved sending her on the mission. "They didn't give me enough time to think about what was happening. They pushed and encouraged me. I did everything they told me," she said. When she was asked about what her action would do to her family, she answered that she didn't think about them, but rather about her boyfriend.<sup>21</sup>

In a number of personal interviews that I conducted with Arin in prison in early 2005, she came across as an articulate educated young woman with very strong opinions. Like many suicide terrorists whom I interviewed in prison, she did not refrain from describing the plight of the Palestinians, and asserted that Israel bore exclusive responsibility for their volunteering for suicide missions. Arin strongly opposed the claim that the main trigger for her volunteering for the mission had been the death of her boyfriend. When I told her that I had understood this from what I had read in her interviews and what I heard veiled in her words, she stated,

The goal of my going on the mission was not vengeance; it was to deliver a message to people in Israel to stop the occupation, and to make them feel the pain that the Palestinians felt. We tried to stop our suffering many times, in various ways, but no one listened to us. As a Palestinian girl, how can I stop the suffering if my home is constantly under occupation, and there are tanks surrounding my home, while everyone in the world is enjoying music, and the only melody I can hear is the sound of bullets. Had I carried out my mission, I would have made Israeli society think twice about why I had blown myself up. The

Israelis who voted for Sharon are to blame for the situation that has been created.

She explained the reason why she had backed out by saying, "I eventually realized that both I and the Israelis I would be killing were human beings, that I had no right to take their lives, and that God would be angry at me if I assumed this right myself."<sup>22</sup>

In these conversations, Arin was hesitant to say explicitly that her handlers had exploited her unhappy personal situation to lead her to go through with her slip of the tongue and send her to her death. When I told her that our conversations had made this as clear as daylight to me, she smiled in assent, and said that when she got out, she would have something to say to several people.<sup>23</sup> Arin expressed anger at those who had sent her for not honoring her decision to avoid killing women and children, and especially for trying to persuade her to retract her decision not to carry out the suicide attack, and later trying to send her on another terrorist mission. In my conversations with the handler who had been responsible for sending her on the mission, he denied that he had tried to persuade her to go on another mission.<sup>24</sup> This denial was echoed by the person who drove her to and from the site of the operation.<sup>25</sup>

Arin is one of a relatively rare type of suicide terrorist (female and male): those who changed their minds after reaching their target, because they decided, out of moral principle, not to kill innocent people. In conversation, Arin gave an impression of credibility, maturity, and articulateness, which are not typical characteristics of suicide terrorists. In her interviews, she took care to project a tough nationalistic line, which she regarded as completely justified. Yet there were nonetheless elements of uncertainty and questioning. Although she refrained from explicitly condemning suicide terrorist operations and linked the rationale for them to the prevailing military and political situation in the region, she ended one of her interviews with the rhetorical question, addressed mostly to herself, "How can I condemn suicide terrorist attacks when I myself went on such a mission?"

## **Wafa al-Bas**

On the morning of June 20, 2005, Wafa Samir Ibrahim al-Bas, aged twenty-one, a resident of the Jabalya refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip, came to the Erez roadblock with ten kilograms of explosives hidden in her underclothes. She was en route to the Soroka Medical Center in Beersheva, where she planned to blow

herself up. Al-Bas had been badly burned in an accident in late 2004 when a heater in her family's home exploded, seriously injuring her. She was treated at the Soroka Medical Center. Seizing this opportunity, the people who sent her attempted to have her carry out a suicide terrorist attack at the hospital where she had a medical checkup scheduled.

The Erez roadblock is located on the border between the Gaza Strip and Israel. When al-Bas neared the place where security checks were conducted, she aroused the suspicion of the Israeli security forces. Realizing that her plan had been discovered, she unsuccessfully tried a number of times to activate the explosive device on her person. After the explosives were neutralized, she was arrested and brought for questioning.

Shortly after, the print and broadcast media were allowed to conduct interviews with al-Bas. In contrast to the two cases discussed above, all the interviews with her were conducted during a single day, before she was brought to the prison facility with her compatriots and before she underwent any process of indoctrination and preparation for interviews. In contrast to her compatriots, who were more personal in their initial interviews, al-Bas's initial interviews were of a demonstratively belligerent nationalistic character. She presented an inflexible and uncompromising stance regarding her motives and the reason that she had enlisted for her mission. Only in later interviews on the same day, when her demonstrative single-mindedness began to dissipate, did she express her realization that her handlers had exploited her disability and resulting poor mental state.

The contrast between interviews was stark. In her initial interviews, al-Bas declared, "I wanted to kill forty to fifty Israelis. I didn't care whether children would be among them. Our children also died. I had no personal reasons. All my motives were nationalistic, coming from my heart and stemming from my beliefs. I believe in death. This is a privilege for us, especially death in the way of Allah. I'm also a victim of my country. I'm willing to sacrifice myself a thousand times."<sup>26</sup> In another interview, she said that ever since she had been a small child, she had wanted to die for Allah, and that her dream had been, and still remained, to be a *shahida*, and to die for Allah. "I enlisted from nationalistic and religious motives in order to defend the people and the land, and for no other reason...I'm a daughter of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and I wanted to carry out a suicide mission in order to participate in the freedom struggle."<sup>27</sup> At this point, she still denied that her volunteering had been connected with her difficult external appearance caused by the many burns and scars on her body: "All my motives are nationalistic, coming from my heart and stemming

from my beliefs. I believe in death. This is a privilege for us, especially death in the way of God. I'm also a sacrifice of my country, and I'm willing to sacrifice myself a thousand times."<sup>28</sup>

In later media interviews, however, she claimed that the explosives had been planted on her without her knowledge, when she was under the influence of drugs in a Palestinian hospital. In one interview, she even burst into tears and wailed, "Yesterday, I was free. I remember how I was yesterday, and I see how I am today." In this interview, it seemed that she had suddenly been struck by the recognition that those who sent her may have exploited her: "Forgive me, Mother, I wish I hadn't done this to myself, I wish I had listened to you." At the end of the interview, al-Bas said that her parents, who had known about her intention, had attributed her deed to her fears that she would be a burden to her family and that her death would help them through the financial compensation that they would receive from Fatah.<sup>29</sup>

Some time later, I saw Wafa for a short while in prison but was not allowed by her protective associates to converse with her, under the claim that she was still in a difficult emotional state. Still, we exchanged a few words when she entered a cell where I was interviewing her friends. She seemed quite happy, smiled, and greeted me, and I told her that I was glad to see her alive. Later one of her fellow inmates confided that she had pressed Wafa about her recruitment and especially, why she tried to blow herself in the Erez zone after she was quarantined, even though it was obvious she couldn't hurt any Israeli. Wafa confessed that she was solicited by her friend – the sister of the dispatcher – to volunteer. She agreed, but when she subsequently had second thoughts, she was threatened so that she would fulfill her mission. Her senders told her to blow herself up even if she was spotted by the Israelis and she attempted to do so because this was the order; in other words, she followed the orders out of her overwhelming fear.<sup>30</sup>

The many versions given by al-Bas to the media during a brief period represented the typical fluctuating and contradictory versions of their motives given by female suicide terrorists. In this case, she went within a short period of time from stressing declared ideological nationalistic motives to a public pondering of her personal motives that had been cultivated and exploited by those who sent her. Her transition from belligerent nationalistic statements and predominantly religious arguments to a realization that her handlers had taken advantage of her by encouraging her fears regarding her social disability and unfortunate physical and cosmetic state to recruit her for a deed that would bestow national fame on her and economic benefit to her family was rapid and intense. At the same time, it will come as no surprise if

during her imprisonment (she was sentenced to fourteen years in prison), she will undergo an indoctrination process by her cellmates that will lead her too to present once again a nationalistic and religious version to the media as her sole motive for volunteering for her mission.

## Conclusion

The involvement of women in suicide terrorist attacks carried out by various organizations around the world is an established fact. At the same time, even though women are an integral part of the phenomenon, their numbers are still small, compared with the number of male suicide terrorists, and their role in the suicide terrorist apparatus is limited. They do not manage the organizations, hold command positions, or send other people on suicide terrorist missions. Among the Palestinian organizations, the status of female suicide terrorists does not differ from those of their counterparts around the world. The female Palestinian suicide terrorists do not take part in the decision making process in their organizations, and their opinions are not the determining factor even in the suicide missions on which they are sent, except for their volunteering or expressing agreement to take part in these missions.

The media image of the female Palestinian suicide terrorists as independent women with strong opinions and a key role in the process that led them to their deaths in the service of a national or religious ideal fades away when sincere personal conversations are held with them. This feeling is reinforced by conversations with male suicide terrorists, and particularly with those who sent the women on their missions and say that the use of women in suicide missions is a matter of tactical necessity, dictated mainly by operational difficulties. In the absence of these factors, they would have avoided including women in this type of action, which is not accepted in the conservative societies in which they operate. They admit that, to a great extent, Palestinian society continues to embrace the traditional image of women as responsible for educational and social functions, or at most helpers of male warriors – definitely not leaders of divisions into battle, or fighters sacrificing their lives on their own.

In the many interviews granted by female suicide terrorists to the various media, some of which were conducted after they underwent indoctrination by their cellmates, they indicated that they regarded themselves as fulfilling the function of publicizing nationalistic messages. This theme often comes in stark contradiction to the personal interviews that they granted soon after their arrest. They explained their volunteering for missions in terms of equal participation in the national struggle of

their people. Particularly in the Arab media, they are thus marketed as independent and determined women with strongly held opinions, who decided to take their fate into their hands with a feeling of completeness and destiny – rather like a modern version of Joan of Arc. They are portrayed as having special, noble personal qualities, and are also used to motivate men to follow their example. Yet more thorough probing and examination of the interviews with the female Palestinian suicide terrorists, which to a large extent has defined the image of female suicide terrorists around the world, is likely to paint a more complete, complex picture of reality.

Accordingly, a more critical reading of what the female suicide terrorists have said and an examination of the changes in their interviews over time is warranted. Particular attention should be paid to the time when the interview was conducted, relative to the date when the person interviewed was arrested. The reader should be aware of the process of socialization and organizational and national conformity reflected in many of the later interviews. The statements as to their motivation to be a martyr, made by both Palestinian and other female suicide bombers worldwide, may reflect their authentic need to take part in fighting against their people's enemy, but it does not in any way change their unequal and inferior social status as well as the reluctance of their traditional societies to include women in these operations.

## Notes

- 1 Interview with Nasser Shawish, affiliated with Fatah, January 19, 2005.
- 2 Raphael Israel, "Palestinian Women: The Quest for a Voice in the Public Square through 'Islamikaze Martyrdom,'" Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Hebrew University, Spring 2004, p. 83.
- 3 MEMRI, "Leadership of the al-Qaeda Women's Organization: Suicide Attacks by Women on the Way," March 13, 2003.
- 4 The figures charted in the graphs were provided by the General Security Services in Israel, and were accurate as of mid-September 2005.
- 5 From early 2004 through June 2006, I conducted approximately one hundred formal interviews, in addition to numerous informal conversations.
- 6 Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Nasser Shawish of Fatah on January 19, 2005.
- 7 Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Nasser Shawish of Fatah on January 19, 2005.
- 8 Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Sharif Naji of Fatah on February 27, 2005.

- 9 Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Abd al-Raouf Jihad Kawasme of Hamas on September 27, 2005.
- 10 Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Amjad Ubeidi on January 24, 2005.
- 11 Al-Jazeera, interview with Amjad Ubeidi, August 16, 2005.
- 12 Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Latifa Saadi of Fatah on April 18, 2006.
- 13 Yoav Limor, "I Felt Rejected," *Maariv* internet site, May 30, 2002.
- 14 Anat Berko, *On the Way to the Garden of Eden – The World of Female and Male Suicide Terrorists and Their Handlers* (Yediot Ahronot Press, 2004), p. 130.
- 15 Berko, p. 130.
- 16 Berko, p. 131.
- 17 Chen Kost-Bar, "I Dreamed of Killing over 100," *Maariv* magazine, January 23, 2004.
- 18 Vered Levy Barzilai, "An Experience of Near-Death," *Haaretz*, June 2002, p. 1.
- 19 Barzilai, pp. 5-6.
- 20 Barzilai, p. 6.
- 21 Barzilai, p. 6.
- 22 Interview conducted by Yoram Schweitzer with Arin Ahmad on March 22, 2005.
- 23 Interview conducted by Yoram Schweitzer with Arin Ahmad on March 2, 2005.
- 24 Interview conducted by Yoram Schweitzer with Ahmad Mugarbi on October 6, 2005.
- 25 Interview conducted by Yoram Schweitzer with Ibrahim Sarakhne on November 14, 2005.
- 26 Eli Bohadana and Amit Cohen, "A Patient in the Service of Terrorism," *Maariv*, June 21, 2005, p. 4.
- 27 The Center for the Intelligence Heritage, The Center for Intelligence and Terrorism Information, June 21, 2005.
- 28 Eli Bohadana and Amit Cohen, "A Patient in the Service of Terrorism," *Maariv*, June 21, 2005, p. 4.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with an assistant to a suicide operation, January 19, 2005.



# **The Palestinian and Israeli Media on Female Suicide Terrorists**

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**Avi Issacharoff**

Female suicide terrorists have consistently attracted abundant media attention. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Israeli and Arab (mostly Palestinian) media have peddled competing versions of reality. In a certain sense, the Israeli version of reality perpetuates the chauvinism in Arab Islamic society, and portrays the female Palestinian suicide terrorist in a relatively sympathetic light, compared with the male suicide terrorist. This narrative portrays her as weak and subject to manipulation by a chauvinist society. As such, it focuses on personal and social aspects, and ignores nationalist motives. The Arab media, on the other hand, develops the feminist dimension, portraying the Palestinian female suicide terrorist as a full partner in the national and religious jihad, while downplaying personal aspects.

The Israeli media likes female suicide terrorists; it takes a greater interest in female terrorists than male terrorists. The Israeli press admires and flatters female terrorists, demonstrates excessive empathy for their deeds, and hangs on every piquant detail and gossip about these women. It describes them as women with difficult social backgrounds who come from the margins of Palestinian society and have problems at home, mostly relating to their family situation. The question arises, of course, whether they are very different from male suicide terrorists, and the answer is that they are not particularly different. Male suicide terrorists also usually come from the margins of Palestinian society, and have various personal problems that make it easier to recruit them for suicide terrorism. In the case of men, however, the media mostly comments on the revenge motive – family members of the terrorist who were killed – or his difficult economic background, hinting that the male terrorist had nothing to lose. A male terrorist will not receive the same empathy and interest as a female suicide terrorist, about whom the question always arises whether she had a romantic affair, divorce, personal distress stemming from rape, for example, or,

needless to say, problems in having children, which pushed her to commit a terrorist attack.

For example, a report in *Yediot Ahronot* states, "This is how terrorist organizations recruit female suicide terrorists to commit suicide attacks: 'If you don't commit a suicide terrorist attack, we'll tell people you were raped.' Agents of Fatah and Tanzim in the Beit Lehem area rape young Palestinian women, or seduce them into having sexual relations. Then they blackmail them by telling them, 'Either you commit suicide attacks, or we'll tell your family.' These are reports obtained by IDF intelligence sources." According to these reports, at least as described in *Yediot Ahronot*, special units of rapists are operating on behalf of Tanzim in the Bethlehem area with the express purpose of cultivating female suicide terrorists, though the special rapist units obviously play no direct part in the terrorist attacks.

The female suicide terrorist is given preferential treatment in the Israeli media, while the man is judged harshly. Men are ostensibly driven solely by motives of security and economics, and we journalists rarely ask any questions at all about whether the man was unable to get married and whether the social status of an involuntarily unwed Muslim man is good. We pay much less attention to these matters with male suicide terrorists than in the case of a female suicide terrorist.

This approach has been characteristic of the Israeli press since the emergence of the female terrorists during the intifada. In February 2002, the local newspaper *Kol Hazman* wrote about Wafa Idris, the first female suicide terrorist: "Her father died when she was eight years old. Her brother served ten years in an Israeli prison, and founded al-Aqsa Brigades in the al-Amri refugee camp. Her husband divorced her after she had a miscarriage in the seventh month of pregnancy, and two months ago, she refused to remarry. Is it possible that Wafa Idris, a paramedic in the Red Crescent, committed suicide this week on Jaffa Street mostly because her life was so miserable?"

Other examples of excessive interest in personal details abound. In February 2004, following the killing of Hamas member Abed al-Nasser Abu-Shuka, a great deal of gossip was written about willingness of Rim Riashi, the terrorist from the Erez border crossing who was Hamas's first female suicide terrorist, to carry out a suicide attack. The *Maariv* newspaper wrote, "The terrorist killed in Gaza was the lover of the female suicide terrorist from Erez. When the illicit affair between the Hamas man and a married woman was discovered, her lover equipped her with an explosive belt, and sent her on a suicide mission at the Erez border crossing. The senior Hamas leader killed last week by a mysterious explosion in his house,

Abed al-Nasser Abu-Shuka, was the lover of Rim Riashi, the suicide terrorist who committed the attack at the Erez border crossing a month ago." It is as if al-Reyashi had no say at all in the matter. We journalists tend to treat female suicide terrorists with kid gloves.

Another report in *Maariv* concerned Souad Aslan, a female suicide terrorist or, more accurately, a Palestinian woman who planned to commit a suicide bombing and was stopped before she could carry out the attack. *Maariv* reported, "In Dil 8, Souad Aslan from Gaza was critically wounded by an exploding gas canister in her home. She was hospitalized for nine months in a hospital with her entire body covered by burns, and is still in need of surgery. Her story, however, is even more tragic. In addition to the burns covering her skin, Aslan is alone. She is single, and says that she has no friends. Since she was wounded, she has stopped studying, and has neither resumed her studies nor worked. What has she done all these years? She has mostly taken care of the house, and has spent the rest of her time praying and watching children's programs on television."

A particularly pitiful story about a Palestinian woman named Rasha, who planned to commit a suicide terrorist attack and was arrested, was published in a weekend magazine of *Yediot Ahronot* in November 2004. "Rasha was born a year before the beginning of the first intifada," the newspaper wrote, and continued:

When she was born, her father, Khaled, was no longer near her. He left her mother, Mariam, when she was pregnant. Several months after the birth, Rasha's mother married another man, and gave birth to two sons – Rasha's younger brothers. Since she was born, her father, Khaled, has lived close to them in the camp, but he kept away from them. He was geographically close, but they were very far from his heart. All during her childhood and teenage years, Rasha tried to get close to him, but he avoided her. He even ordered his young children from his new wife to stay away from his beautiful daughter, Rasha. He broke her heart very, very badly, her mother repeated to me. "Not only did he keep away from her and not recognize her; he also caused her terrible problems, because young men attracted by her beauty stayed away from her. With us, when a man looks for a girl, he wants to be introduced to her parents. Her family history is no less important than her looks. Rasha had a difficult family history. There was no father to whom she could present a prospective groom. She was a wonderful daughter, a good student, and the backbone of the household," her mother said, and broke into

tears. "She did everything to attract his attention. When he drew away from her, he marked her as damaged, and she became depressed. She, who was once so active and full of life and helped me with everything, stopped eating, and sat alone in her room. She was attracted to wanted terrorists," her mother told me. "Perhaps because she had no father, she was swept away by strong men. Perhaps she identified with people who were being hunted, whose lives were in danger."

The way Israelis perceive the status of Muslim women obviously plays a key role in the compulsive attention paid by the Israeli media to the personal family circumstances that bring Palestinian women to commit suicide attacks. Right or wrong, we journalists mostly regard a Muslim woman as someone whose role is confined to the kitchen and childbearing. Taking part in terrorist attacks and warfare is considered especially unusual. Take, for example, a story in *Kol Ha'ir*, a local Jerusalem newspaper, about suicide attacks. This is how the reporter describes the Palestinian woman: "Barring exceptional cases, women are under the tutelage of their father until their marriage. In the absence of their father, their brothers are responsible for them. After marriage, the woman obviously comes under the guardianship of her husband. In effect, in most cases, every significant movement by a Palestinian woman, such as shopping far from her home, requires the consent of her husband or father." The reporter goes on to describe Wafa Idris. "Twenty-seven year old Idris, a refugee, was among those with the lowest status in Palestinian society. She lived in the al-Amri refugee camp. Her father was dead. Her relationship with her brother was tense and stormy. Her cousin, Ahmad, divorced her after nine years of marriage with no children. All this made her abnormal. A barren divorcee who returns to her parents' home is a nightmare for most Palestinian families. Economically, she was a burden, and her chances of remarrying and leaving her parents' home were negligible."

In the first two cases of female suicide terrorists, the profile assembled by the press and defense agencies in Israel indeed matched the perpetrators. Wafa Idris and Dareen Abu Aisha were divorced and childless. However, the next female suicide terrorists were eighteen year old Aayat al-Ahras from Bethlehem, Andalib Taqtaqah from Beit Fajar, and Hiba Daraghme from Tubas, who deviated from the profile of women with problems. These young women had no unusual social problems, and perhaps therefore various writers concentrated on the storm that their terrorist attacks aroused in the Palestinian public and the great anger of their families. The writers implied that terrorist attacks by childless divorced women would be received

with understanding by the families of female suicide terrorists. The writer of one story hinted that their families might even be glad of their deaths, because a barren divorcee who returns to her parents' home is a nightmare for most Palestinian families.

And what of the Arab media? Arab journalists usually ignore any personal details of a woman who committed a suicide terrorist attack. And to the credit of the Arab media, however, let it be said that they almost always omit the personal aspect in cases of suicide terrorist attacks committed by men as well. Media discussion of female perpetrators is confined to a dry report, with slight hints of a hostile response from the family; the terrorist organizations' need for operational assistance from women; and of course the Muslim religious and social issue of women's involvement in suicide terrorist attacks.<sup>1</sup>

On the day following the terrorist attack by Zina Abu Salem from the Askar refugee camp on September 23, 2004, the Palestinian newspaper *al-Ayyam* reported that al-Aqsa Brigades had taken responsibility for the attack. The newspaper reported that the attack was an act of revenge for the crimes of the occupation, the targeted killings, and the like. A few details about the terrorist's family were given. It was mentioned, almost in passing, that her father and mother had been taken to a hospital after feeling unwell. The national perspective is reported first, with only marginal mention made of a personal perspective.

Immediately after the first suicide terrorist attack by a woman, the January 2002 attack in Jerusalem by Wafa Idris, the Arab media debated extensively the question of the legitimacy of women's involvement in suicide attacks. For example, the Arab newspaper *al-Quds*, published in London, quoted the Fatah Revolutionary Council as saying, "The martyr's death of Wafa restored honor to the national role of the Palestinian woman, who has carried out the most remarkable exploits in the long struggle for national freedom. The Palestinian woman reiterates that she stands at the side of the men in the struggle for freedom." Qais Abdul Karim from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine added, "The martyr's death of that flower, Wafa, proves that all sectors of our people, men and women, each at the other's side, are united in the struggle for freedom, and in the confrontation with aggression."

While the responses of the secular terrorist organizations were enthusiastic, Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, head of the most prominent religious terrorist organization, sounded more ambivalent, at least initially. He explained why, from a religious standpoint (or, if not from a religious standpoint, at least from an operational standpoint), there was no need for women to be involved in terrorist attacks,

and why such involvement was completely undesirable. He said, "The Islamic movement cannot absorb all the Palestinian men demanding to participate in jihad and acts of self sacrifice." He continued, "A time will come in the future of decisive confrontation with the Israeli occupier, and then men, women, and old people will take part in the jihad. Meanwhile, however, there is no military organization for women under the auspices of the movement, and we have no real need for them." Yassin elegantly rejected the involvement of women in suicide terrorist attacks, although his colleagues in Hamas justified it. Two years later, Yassin himself gave religious approval for Rim Riashi to commit the first suicide terrorist attack by a woman under Hamas sponsorship. Similarly, other leaders of Hamas also support the involvement of women in terrorist attacks, Sheikh Hassan Yusef, one of the leading Hamas figures in the West Bank, told me in an interview in Ramallah. It is permissible for a Muslim woman to fight against occupation and take part in the jihad, he said.

The feminist perspective was featured in the Arab and Palestinian media. For example, the Egyptian newspaper *al-Akhabar* wrote about Idris, "The body parts of the *shahida* outlined the change on the earth of the fatherland, and in the ideology of the struggle. Palestinian women have torn the gender classification out of their birth certificates, declaring that sacrifice for the Palestinian homeland would not be for men alone; on the contrary, all Palestinian women will write the history of the liberation with their blood, and will become time bombs in the face of the Israeli enemy. They will not settle for being mothers of martyrs. The intifada is continuing, and its coals will burn until victory is born," obviously from the womb of the intifada.

At the same time, this attitude has also drawn some criticism. The sympathy expressed by some of the Arab media has also sparked dialogue and debate on the issue. For example, following the action of Rim Riashi, Fatah personnel and representatives of the secular terrorist organizations wrote in a Fatah publication,

A 22 year old girl, mother of two children, one of them a baby and the other a little girl, carried out an act of self-sacrifice. Who issued a Muslim religious ruling depriving the baby of its mother? Who decided to add two more orphans to the list of Palestinian orphans? On the basis of which passages in the Qur'an and the Hadith does a young mother abandon her true jihad role, which is raising two children, one of whom needs her milk? By what right do they present us to the world as lacking the most basic human feelings?

In this case, the Arab press is commenting on the principle of the participation of married women and mothers in suicide terrorist attacks, certainly not romantic affairs.

In an article published in *al-Quds* in January 2004, Abd al-Aziz Rantisi responded to reports that Rim Riashi was having an illicit affair. He wrote, "I ask forgiveness from you for not permitting my pen to write the substance of what the Zionists and their agents devised in the interpretation that they gave to this colossal act, and other acts carried out by women." He continued, "All the things that were said in the Zionist press concerning the motives that made a woman in the flower of her youth, the mother of two children, sacrifice herself, are a figment of the Zionist imagination, biblical, fraudulent, and disgraceful." Rantisi's claim was that all those who attributed these terrorist attacks to personal motives were serving the Zionists, which may account for the scarcity of comments on personal aspects in the Arab media.

In summary, there are those on both sides who present a different perspective. For example, in January 2002, the newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, published in London, discussed the biography of Wafa Idris extensively, and theorized that her divorce and barrenness had led her to commit a suicide terrorist attack. In the Israeli press, the best description (in my opinion) was by a senior military source in the weekend *Maariv*. He wrote,

Keep in mind that women aren't the only ones who commit suicide. The men who commit suicide also have personal problems. The terrorist organizations look for weak people, sometimes with difficult backgrounds and distress. More than once, this distress is of romantic origin. For example, there was a terrorist whom we caught in Haifa, who wanted to commit suicide because of unrequited love. Some of the girls also suffered from unrequited love – crises with a romantic background. Most of them had personalities that made them an easy target for the terrorist industry. They were introverted, easy to influence, and had lost interest in life. I wouldn't say that all the female suicide terrorists and attempted suicide terrorists to date have had something in common, other than the desire to commit suicide. There are profound discussions about the role of the Palestinian woman in publicizing Palestinian terrorism. Up until a certain stage, their job was to be mothers, to supply sons, to be a supporter. Later, women received other roles, like those of women in our army. Their women have also

had other jobs since late 2001 and early 2002, which is when it began, more or less. The question that the terrorist organizations are asking is how to kill as many Israelis as possible. Their main issue is not in favor or against women. For them, a woman is just a vehicle for bringing the bomb to its target, just like a man. In the case of the Erez border crossing, the female terrorist also very much wanted to commit the attack, and they may have found it difficult to carry the attack using a man, so they chose her. The point is not the personal background of the female suicide terrorist, but the fact they succeeded in creating another bomb in their suicide terrorist factory.

## Notes

- 1 My thanks to the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) for translating some of the reports.

# **Female Martyrdom: The Ultimate Embodiment of Islamic Existence?**

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**Rivka Yadlin**

In January 2002, Wafa Idris, a young Palestinian woman from the al-Amri refugee camp adjacent to Ramallah, blew herself up on a crowded Jerusalem street. The Israel Defense Forces, Israeli public opinion, and many in the West were taken by surprise, if not outright astounded. Conversely, the Arab press, and to a greater degree the Islamic press, reacted with elated jubilation. "It's a woman!" cheered *al-Sha'ab*, an Islamic Egyptian newspaper, in a headline that played on an "It's a boy!" greeting card announcement for the felicitous birth of a son.<sup>1</sup> *Al-Ahram*, a leading Egyptian establishment newspaper, saw in Wafa with her dreamy eyes and the mysterious smile on her lips the likeness of Mona Lisa.<sup>2</sup> Some Islamic voices indeed took exception to the novelty, such as Sheikh Tantawi of al-Azhar in Cairo, or Hamas's Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, who faulted a woman leaving home improperly clad and unaccompanied by a male family member for breaching the boundaries of modesty. Ultimately, however, both relented and gave approval to such otherwise immoral conduct if the goal is as sublime as martyrdom.<sup>3</sup>

It was little wonder that the West was taken by surprise. Not only was the phenomenon of a Palestinian female suicide bomber practically unprecedented; it also departed from the universal feminine stereotype of women as gentler, softer, and certainly less prone to physical aggression than men. In a traditional Muslim society (and the majority of Muslim societies are traditional) women are perceived moreover as timid, modest, and sexually pure, all of which preclude free inter-gender mingling. Whether by free will or social pressure, they are mostly confined to the private realm, home, and family; to serving and satisfying their husbands' needs; and to childbirth and childrearing. They are thus associated with the myth of the gift of life rather than that of death. Moreover, not only are Muslim women marked stereotypically by those feminine traits – as are Western women to a great extent,

even in the days of the emerging Alpha Woman – but such traits and roles are also perceived as a social and religious commandment, which has been both internalized by women and harshly enforced by their social environment.

Thus, the chorus of responses to this watershed event, which no sooner became a phenomenon as more women followed in Wafa's footsteps, both as planners of attacks and as suicide bombers themselves, showed a marked tendency to cast it as an aberration. This phenomenon involved women ostensibly unable to marry or give birth, or who went astray and were bound to die in any event – in short, such as were marginalized by normative society. Typologies that emerged from research conducted in Israel on suicide bombers have highlighted the prototype of the exploited individual (with women figuring frequently among the ranks of the exploited), whereby deviations from society's behavioral norms are singled out as leading to suicide bombing.<sup>4</sup> Miriam Cooke of Duke University, a prominent feminist researcher and activist for the emancipation of women in the Middle East, concluded that female martyrdom must be accounted for by a total despair of the Arab woman in the struggle to empower herself against the US, the old colonial forces, and her husband. Shibli Telhami of Maryland University and the Brookings Institute found evidence in the participation of women in suicide terrorism (prior to the participation of Hamas women) for the secularization of the phenomenon. In any event, suicide bombers, especially female, are portrayed as coming from an aberrant and marginal background.<sup>5</sup>

All this, however, is in the eye of the Western analyst. A largely different perspective emerges when the case is viewed from the other side, examined within the existential environment of these young women. Some of the points linking the female martyrdom phenomenon to the background of the women have also been cited in Israeli research, namely, that the foremost condition facilitating martyrdom is a favorable social environment and sympathetic media that disseminates favorable information within the supportive society.<sup>6</sup> Societies as a rule will support a certain conduct when it is consonant with the relevant normative mindset and consciousness. This mindset, represented today by the principal spokespersons of Muslim societies, increasingly propounds an Islamic way of life that may be unassociated with political motives and is merely promoting piety and following the religious laws for daily conduct. Oftentimes, however, it is interwoven with support for the war effort, with the Palestinian dimension at the center joined by the campaign against those hostile to the interests of the Islamic nation. Within this atmosphere of destiny and a holy war, death gains an aura of inspired creativity, glorified in the context of expressions

such as “the art of death,” “the death industry,” “the death aspiration,” or “betrothal in death.” A culture of self-sacrifice is constructed with the martyrs as culture-heroes, the *shahid* and his family thus enjoying great prestige and admiration (not to speak of material reward) within both their immediate surroundings and broader circles informed by the media all over the Arab/Muslim world.<sup>7</sup>

The emergence of women martyrs caused no difficulty in the narrow Muslim social liberal circles, since the war effort is of supreme importance on their agenda, and men and women should in any case be equal participants. Nawal al-Sa’adawi, an anti-Islamist Egyptian pan-Arab activist and feminist, has supported female suicide bombers in the course of the current dispute over the definition of terrorism:

Israel and the West call resistance operations “terrorism.” . . . Are we to castigate those who fought with their own bare hands and died [doing so]? Are we to criticize a woman who loads herself up with explosives, blows herself up, and dies? Are we to castigate her for having blown herself up after having seen her father and her brothers killed? If I were in her place I would load myself up with dynamite and blow myself up. . . . How can I castigate the victim?<sup>8</sup>

More significantly, however, Islamic gatekeepers from various circles and countries (e.g., Sheikh Ali Abu al-Hassan, head of al-Azhar’s Religious Ruling Committee – “Fatwa Committee”; the Tabligh Movement; and the al-Qaeda mouthpiece) soon joined in supporting women martyrs under the religious ruling that all of Islam’s wars are just and holy wars.<sup>9</sup> Evidence is brought forth from the Qur’an, which addresses men and women as one (33:35), and the legacy of the prophet, who said that if a Muslim country is attacked by an enemy, the obligation to wage war – the jihad – applies to each and every Muslim (*fardh ‘ayn* – an individual obligation, rather than *fardh kifayah* – a collective obligation). Accordingly, a person does not fulfill his/her duty through the actions of the Muslim collective, and a woman is obligated to go to war, even without permission from her husband. Further evidence and legitimization is drawn from the example of women in early Islamic history, such as ‘Aishah, wife of the prophet, who led tens of thousands in the Battle of the Camel; Safiyyah, his cousin, who killed and beheaded a Jew from the Qurayzah tribe; and several other daring brave women who took part in holy warfare.<sup>10</sup>

The phenomenon of Palestinian female suicide bombers is hence relatively new, somewhat problematic, and calls for special reasoning, but nevertheless widely accepted and endowed with legitimacy. Can this be taken as an indication of the penetration of Western values into Muslim society, and a step towards the

empowerment of women according to Western criteria, as stated with satisfaction by Western observers? If a woman can choose her death, can she henceforth also be free to choose the way she lives?<sup>11</sup>

Further consideration of *al-Sha'ab*, the Islamist publication cheering under the headline "It's a woman," indicates otherwise. What was the jubilation about? Was it merely about a victory and reinforcement of the ranks, as might indeed be concluded from the newspaper's words: "It's a woman who taught you today a lesson in heroism, that taught you the meaning of jihad; it's a woman who wrote in letters of fire the war of a holy sacrifice, which struck fear into the heart of the enemy entity." Reading on, however, the cardinal message presents itself: "It's a woman who is showing you today, Muslim women, the meaning of true freedom, with which women's rights activists have tempted you...It's a woman who has now proved that the meaning of women's liberation is to free their body from this world's trials, and to accept death with a powerful brave embrace." An Egyptian sociologist linked with the Muslim Brotherhood expands on this theme (note the mirror image of Western views concerning marginality):

The West has already grasped that all the money it spends in order to distort the consciousness of the Muslim woman, and to make her think that her body and needs are the most important thing... is money wasted. Women mobilized by the West... are unable to influence women in any Arab country. All their talk about women's liberation, equality with men, and their right to libertine conduct, exposing their bodies, flaunting their feminine allure, and similar matters discussed at symposia funded by America and the West falls on deaf ears, except for a small marginal group of superficial women who have lost all hope.<sup>12</sup>

Even the establishment Jordanian newspaper *al-Dustur* echoes this line: "The Arab woman has taken her place and her dignity. It is the women's rights activists in the West who robbed women of their right to be human, and viewed them as bodies without souls. . . .Wafa Idris, like the rest of the young women of her generation . . . did not carry makeup in her suitcase, but enough explosives to fill the enemies with horror . . . .Wasn't it the West that kept demanding that the Eastern woman become equal to the man? Well, this is how we understand equality."<sup>13</sup>

Hence the approval and support extended to female suicide bombers is not merely blessing the enhanced war effort. The jubilation is about the confirmation of the path outlined for women by Muslim society, and the emergent proof that Muslim women reject consistent Western pressure that they be given Western-style freedom.

A demand of this sort is widely considered not only as despicable and corrupting, but moreover as an attack on the Islamic order – a Western imperialist assault on the Muslim mind and its value system.<sup>14</sup> The majority of female Muslim activists are aware of the prevalent aversion in society to Western feminism and are even party to this aversion, and therefore maintain that the way to improve women’s status within society and the family is within the dominant normative order. This is done by introducing into Muslim annals the “Her Story”<sup>15</sup> – history viewed through the role of women, thus magnifying that role; and through an alternative interpretation of the canonical sources and biographies of Muslim women, a method notably pursued by Fatima Mernissi, an activist feminist professor of sociology from Morocco.<sup>16</sup> Following a similar strategy, Islamist female activists exhibit in the conduct of their daily life both a principled rejection of Western values and the internalization of their role as guardians of Muslim authenticity.<sup>17</sup> What Muslim women say by embracing the existing order is: we don’t want to – or cannot – adopt your way. We have our own way that is superior as well as effective, based on rational causality that derives from our basic principles and is accepted by society.

Their strategy has proven effective. Accepting the injunctions of Islam, whether in theory or in practice – such as adopting the hijab, the new version of Islamic dress – lifts the ban on female visibility in non-familial male society, frees women of their exclusive assignation to the private sphere, and affords them a foothold, freedom of movement and activity, and even authority in the public sphere, though short of the ultimate top position in government. Indeed, the more groups and organizations are closer to Islam, the more they encourage their women to participate in public activities.<sup>18</sup> Their dissent from the Western version of libertine feminism, which in addition to subverting morals positions women against men, mitigates the threat it poses both to the aspiration for cosmic purity that hinges on female conduct as well as to the patriarchal order in the family (even if this is not explicitly stated), and to the Muslim conception of the harmonious society composed of mutually complementing camps, male and female.

However, Muslim public discourse does not stop at ousting the West from its position as a benchmark for universal values. That would merely constitute parochial disavowal and limiting the validity of Western values to the realm of the Western world as a product of the specific course of Western history, falling short of its essential refutation. It would mean that it is right for them, but not for us – but not constitute a fundamental denial. Islamic spokesmen have previously attempted to refute the Western viewpoint but mostly in connection with its secularism,

claiming that it makes the entire world order dependent on man, who is fickle and ephemeral.<sup>19</sup> Increasingly however, whether as a reaction to the Western “assault” or the confidence gained by subaltern cultures in the time of multiculturalism, Muslim (not necessarily Islamic) discourse now pushes further, and tries to debunk Western liberalism and its claims concerning Muslim women, not merely through the use of the limited parochial rationalization of Islam, but also on the home court of Western discourse, using the latter’s own tools. This method poses a more defying challenge to a broader public, including the Western world.

A model example of this trend is Saba Mahmood, an Egyptian-born Muslim feminist, anthropologist, and scholar of religious movements, well-regarded and highly active in the top level of Western academe (Princeton, Chicago, and Cambridge). Mahmood challenges Western liberalism on the whole,<sup>20</sup> asserting that it is a mistake to assume that human agency (a sociological term connoting the ability of autonomous human action to achieve self-fulfillment – a cornerstone of the definition of freedom in Western liberal philosophy) necessarily means an internal personal and natural aspiration of an individual for freedom and quasi-Promethean self-construction. It is a mistake to assume that human agency is the drive to rise up against authority and, as far as women are concerned, defy the structures of male control.

This mistaken assumption triggers deprecatory reactions by feminists across the political spectrum regarding the support and participation of women in the Islamic movements. A common allegation is that these women are held captive in a widespread patriarchal plan, and that if they were released from their shackles, they would naturally express their instinctive abhorrence of the traditional Islamic practices by which they are bound, particularly at a time in which the opportunities for freedom are so great. The fact is, according to Mahmood, that at the heart of Muslim women’s conduct lies the principle of *sabr* – the well-known concept of patience. Thus accepting polygamy, for example, is not considered by pious Muslim women as submission to injustice, but rather a demonstration of the virtue of *sabr*. Even more conspicuous is the issue of the hijab. Many studies, including those by Muslim feminists, define the desire to wear it according to the researchers’ own criteria, hence reaching the conclusion that the motive is social protest, economic need, alienation, or utilitarian strategy. The reasons cited by most veiled women – morality, religion, and values – are dismissed as the imageries of oppressed people.

Wrong, says Mahmood. These responses are based on the assumption that in order for an individual to be free, her actions must be the consequence of her own

will, not of customs, tradition, or plain enforcement. However, she argues, it is logical to assume as well that it is possible that the autonomous will of an individual and its self-realization are directed towards non-liberal goals that are consistent with customs and tradition. It is likewise logical to assume that it is possible that an active and autonomous human agency aspires not necessarily to progressive goals of change and rebellion against social conventions, such as wearing jeans and dying one's hair blue, but to finding purpose, value, and pride in an effort to preserve tradition and stability and embody them in the appropriate way of life.

The liberal view regards this as the internalization by women of their (oppressive) socialization. It is possible, however, to regard it as an active will to adopt the standards set for women by divine commandment, and make them their own through both external behavior and the construction of a coherent spiritual stance that is entrenched and integral to the point where women feel true discomfort when values relevant to women are not applied. This discomfort applies not only to the conduct of the individual herself, but also to the behavior of the surrounding society, behavior that reduces the meaning of Islam to an abstract system of beliefs that does not directly affect the daily life of the individual – how to dress, how to speak, which hobbies are proper, how to invest money, and what form public discourse should take. It can be a process of a conscious effort to reorient aspirations by creating harmony between internal motives, external actions, tendencies, and emotional states through repeated practice of moral deeds.

Furthermore, drawing on Michel Foucault, Mahmood argues that power should not be understood merely according to the simplistic binary model of domination/submission. The ability to act is created and made possible by given relationships of submission that are not necessarily passive. It is composed of struggle, effort, and achievements. Power in this sense is the way in which someone carries out acts on his/her thought, body, behavior, and modes of existence in order to achieve a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, soundness, or eternal life. According to this definition, resisting a relationship of domination is only one form of appropriating an active human agency; forms of accepting domination and hierarchy may also achieve such a state. The Muslim piety movement, researched by Mahmood in Egypt, assumes the existence of a divine plan for human life, as expressed in the Qur'an, its exegeses, the model of the prophet and his companions, and the moral laws derived from them, and every individual must strive, with no legal or other compulsion, to realize this plan. In a context in which there is no separating line between the aspirations of the individual and the conduct enjoined by society, submission to certain forms

of external authority is a necessary condition for realizing an individual's potential, i.e., constituting an active human agency.

Mahmood furthermore suggests that the formative role of the social context of the individual should be considered in a major way. The individual and her conduct are themselves a product of sanctioned traditions that far exceed in their logic and power the consciousness of the individual formed by them. It is not possible to identify a universal range of a human activity – such as “resistance” – outside the framework of the ethical and political conditions where such activities gain their particular meaning.

Mahmood's argument does not directly address the phenomenon of female suicide bombers, but neither does it restrict its conclusions to the researched group of the Egyptian Piety movement and may be applied to the issue at hand and offer an additional angle for analysis. First, in Palestinian society, as in Arab/Muslim society in general, religious devotion is an organizing norm for the ideals the society uplifts. The ideal of women's status and proper conduct, especially when intertwined with a strong national sentiment and intense mobilization to glorified warfare for a concrete and immediate goal, situates female martyrs in the center of the social consensus, rather than the margins. Second, the aspiration for the embodiment of the Islamic ideal of existence that emerges in Mahmood's research may be applied as well to the Palestinian martyrs, who perform the ultimate embodiment – the sacrifice of their body. The plausibility of their act as an autonomous choice for self-realization through acceptance of the prevalent norms in their society, and perhaps most importantly the formation of their autonomous consciousness by their society, further situates them in a consensual position, rather than in one motivated by aberrancy.

The Western liberal view may find it difficult to accept Mahmood's claim concerning its own relativity and the partial role of its secular morality and rationalism in containing the modes of worthy human creativity, even when it relies on Western philosophers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Foucault, and a number of the most prominent Western feminists.<sup>21</sup> This liberal view, however, should take notice of this trend as a demonstration of the firm tendency in Muslim discourse to reject Western views on women's liberation, as well as other liberal Western views – such as democratization – and the ensuing Western demands and pressures for social and political change. It should also take notice of the fact that this rejection is intensifying and becoming more self-confident, no longer challenging out of the periphery of Muslim orthodoxy, using Islamic parochial rationale, but rather in the heart of the Western public sphere, using what the West considers to be universal terms.

Western researchers may find it easier to accept the claim made by subaltern cultures as well as by certain Western researchers, specifically anthropologists,<sup>22</sup> that in order to observe in an informed way the conduct of the “other,” even if “lacking” according to their Western judgment, one must relate to the formative surroundings of the individual as a major factor in understanding her conduct. Furthermore they may not find it difficult to agree that if the individual in question were formed by her surrounding culture, it would include what she may consider as her autonomous choice. The ability of Western researchers to observe traditions that are different from their own from within those “other” traditions, while putting aside their own entrenched traditions and logic, may be an important contribution to a better understanding of action and political processes in those cultures.

## Notes

- 1 *Al-Sha'ab*, February 1, 2002, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 84, February 13, 2002.
- 2 *Al-Ahram*, February 10, 2002, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 85, February 14, 2002.
- 3 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 2, 2002.
- 4 See Anat Berko, *The Path to the Garden of Eden* (Tel Aviv: Mishcal, 2004) [Hebrew] and Shaul Kimhi and Shmuel Even, *Who are the Palestinian Suicide Bombers?* JCSS Memorandum no. 73, Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2004 [Hebrew]. In addition to the examples of the particular women brought there, women can be viewed under the prototype of the exploited individual, the second of the four typologies in the latter study.
- 5 Arts @ Sciences and Trinity College News, June 30, 2003, [www.aas.duke.edu/news/faculty/cooke.php](http://www.aas.duke.edu/news/faculty/cooke.php); and Libby Copeland, “Female Suicide Bombers: The New Factor in the Mideast’s Deadly Equation,” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2002.
- 6 Kimhi and Even; and Reuven Paz, “Suicide and Jihad in Radical Palestinian Islam: The Conceptual Side,” Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, August 1998.
- 7 Barbara Victor, “Equality in Death,” *The Observer*, April 25, 2004; Paz, “Suicide and Jihad in Radical Palestinian Islam,” and Special Information Bulletin, C.S.S., March 2004; *Palestinian Media Watch Bulletin*, July 10, 2005; *al-Ayyam*, August 25, 2005, quoted in al-Jazeera special on female suicide bomber Hanadi Jaradat, MEMRI, *Special Dispatch Series* no. 966, August 22, 2005; *Palestinian Media Watch Bulletin*, August 22, 2005. Cf. also Kevin Toolis: “Why Women Turn to Suicide Bombing,” *The Observer*, October 12, 2003; Avishai Margalit, “The Suicide Bombers,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 16, 2003; Joyce Davis, “Women Suicide Bombers – Equality in Terror?” *The Globalist*, October 21, 2004;

- Inigo Gilmore, "Palestinian Women Volunteer to be Martyrs: After the death of first suicide bomber, dozens of women are signing up for military operations against Israel," *The Sunday Telegraph*, February 4, 2002; [www.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document](http://www.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document); Itamar Marcus, "Encouraging Women Terrorists," *Palestinian Media Watch Bulletin*, March 12, 2002.
- 8 *Kul al-'Arab*, December 24, 2004, in MEMRI, *Special Dispatch Series* no. 876, March 10, 2005.
  - 9 In the religious ruling by Sheikh Abu al-Hassan, head of al-Azhar's Religious Ruling Committee, and as rationalized by 'Itaf 'Alayan, who was apprehended before she completed her mission, *al Sharq al-Awsat*, February 2, 2002, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 83, February 12, 2002. See also *al-Khansa'a*, quoted in "Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center," August 2004, and in MEMRI, *Special Dispatch Series* no. 779, September 7, 2004; and Barbara Metcalf, "Islam and Women: The Case of the Tablighi Jamaat," *SEHR* 5, no. 1 *Contested Politics*, February 27, 2006, [www.stanford.edu](http://www.stanford.edu). 'Abdallah 'Azzam, "Defence of Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Imam," *Religioscope*, [www.religion.info](http://www.religion.info); the ruling on jihad for women, "Islam Question and Answers," n.d. [www.islam-qa.com](http://www.islam-qa.com).
  - 10 See also for example in Afaq 'Arabiyyah, January 30, 2002, in *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, January 31, 2002, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 83, February 12, 2002; and "Courage of Muslim Women," n.d., [www.inter-islam.org](http://www.inter-islam.org).
  - 11 Laura Ann Trombley, "Female Suicide Bombers: The Newest Trend in Terrorism," May 8, 2002, <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefe/joe/tromb1.html>; Barbara Victor, "Equality in Death," *The Observer*, April 25, 2004; and Copeland, "Female Suicide Bombers."
  - 12 *Afaq 'Arabiyyah*, in *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 84, February 13, 2002.
  - 13 *Al-Dustur*, February 5, 2002, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 84, February 13, 2002.
  - 14 Ayatollah Khomeini, quoted in D. Brumberg, "Islamic Rule and Islamic Social Justice," in R. S. Appleby (ed.), *Spokesmen for the Despised: Fundamentalist Leaders of the Middle East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 41. For an expanded discussion on the assault of the mind, see Rivka Yadlin, *An Arrogant Oppressive Spirit: Anti-Zionism as Anti-Judaism in Egypt* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1988).
  - 15 Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (California: University of California Press, 1996); and Evelyn Early, *Baladi Women of Cairo: Playing With an Egg and a Stone* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1993).
  - 16 Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Afshar Haleh, *Islam and Feminism: An Iranian Case Study* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).
  - 17 For more on this subject, see Rivka Yadlin, "Women and Islamic Fundamentalism:

- Suppression or Channel for Political Activism?" in Ofra Bengio, ed., *Women in the Middle East: Between Tradition and Change*, Survey 134, Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies [Hebrew].
- 18 Metcalf, "Islam and Women: The Case of the Tablighi Jamaat."
  - 19 Cf. S. H. Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: Kegan Paul, 1990), p. 108.
  - 20 The discussion of Mahmood's ideas is taken from: Saba Mahmood, *Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival*, *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001):202-26; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), chapter 1; S. Mahmood, "Questioning Liberalism, Too," *Boston Review*, April-May 2003; S. Mahmood and C. Hirschkind, "Feminism, the Taliban and the Politics of Counterinsurgency," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 339-54.
  - 21 Cf. Kay S. Hymowitz, "Why Feminism is AWOL on Islam," *SF Independent Media*, January 15, 2003.
  - 22 Cf. B. Parekh, "The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy," in David Held (ed.), *Prospects for Democracy: North, South, East, West* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 167-71; John Keane, Professor of Politics at the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Westminster University, in an interview with *al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 411, January 3-7, 1999, broadcast on MSA News, January 11, 1999; and Brian Katulis, "The Impact of Public Attitudes," in *Freedom House Report: Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*, May 2005.



# **Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists**

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**Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova**

Chechnya's notorious "Black Widows" have been active since June 7, 2000 when the first Chechen female suicide bombers, Khava Barayeva, cousin of well-known Chechen field commander Arbi Barayev, and Luisa Magomadova drove a truck filled with explosives into the temporary headquarters of an elite OMON (Russian Special Forces) detachment in the village of Alkhan Yurt in Chechnya. The attack resulted in two dead and five wounded. Since then Chechen female terrorists have been involved in twenty-two of the twenty-seven suicide attacks (81 percent of the total number) attributed to Chechen rebels. There were a total of 110 bombers<sup>1</sup> in the period reviewed, forty-seven of whom were women (43 percent of the total; see table 1).<sup>2</sup>

Chechen women bombers were named Black Widows by the Russian and international press when it became clear that many were acting in revenge for the deaths of their husbands, sons, and brothers. Since the Dubrovka Theater takeover in October 2002, in which nineteen female bombers appeared in black mourning clothes with bombs strapped to their bodies, we have engaged in a particular multi-dimensional means of studying these terrorists. The first avenue involved interviewing surviving hostages who had the opportunity to observe and converse with the bomb-girded women, which provides a singular perspective on suicide terrorists. The second measure involved interviewing the women's family members and close associates in Chechnya after the death or arrest of the bombers, to construct a type of psychological post-mortem of the bomber.<sup>3</sup> The third measure was studying news reports and talking to Russian security officials involved in the investigations of such cases. To date we have a sample of forty-five interviews with family members, close associates, or former hostages of thirty-four suicide bombers, twenty-six of them Chechen female suicide terrorists.

**Table 1.** Summary of Suicide Terror Attacks Attributed to Chechens (June 2000-June 2005)

	Date	Place	Total terrorists	Female terrorists	Male terrorists	Fatalities	Injured victims	Hostages	Terrorists' outcome
1	June 7, 2000	Chechnya, Alkhan-Yurt military base (Khava Barayeva, Luiza Magomadova)	2	2	0	2	5	0	Dead
2	June, 2000	Chechnya, military checkpoint	1	0	1	?	?	0	Dead
3	July 2, 2000	Chechnya, military base (Movladi)	1	0	1	33	81	0	Dead
4	Dec. 2000	Chechnya, MVD building (Mareta Duduyeva)	1	1	0	?	?	0	Wounded, later dead
5	Nov. 29, 2001	Chechnya, Urus-Martan, Military office (Elza Gazueva)	1	1	0	1	3	0	Dead
6	Feb. 5, 2002	Chechnya, Grozny, Zavodskoy ROVD (Zarema Inarkaeva)	1	1	0	23	17	0	Wounded
7	Oct. 23-26, 2002	Moscow, Dubrovka Theater	40	19	21	129	644	<800	Dead
8	Dec. 27, 2002	Chechnya, Grozny, governmental complex (Tumrievs family)	3	1	2	83	<200	0	Dead
9	May 12, 2003	Chechnya, Znamenskaya, governmental complex	3	1	2	59	111	0	Dead
10	May 14, 2003	Chechnya, Iliskhan-Yurt, religion festival ( <i>Shahidat</i> Shahbulatova, Zulay Abdurzakova)	2	2	0	18	145	0	Dead
11	June 5, 2003	North Osetia, Mozdok military base (Lida Khildehoroeva)	1	1	0	17	16	0	Dead
12	June 20, 2003	Chechnya, Grozny, governmental complex (Zakir Abdulazimov)	2	1	1	6	38	0	Dead
13	July 5, 2003	Moscow, rock festival (Zulikhan Elihadjieva, Mariam Sharapova)	2	2	0	14	60	0	Dead
14	July 11, 2003	Moscow, Tverskaya Street (Zarema Mujikhoeva)	1	1	0	1	0	0	Survived
15	July 27, 2003	Chechnya, Grozny, military building (Mariam Tashukhadjieva)	1	1	0	?	?	0	Dead
16	Aug. 1, 2003	North Osetia, military hospital	1	0	1	35	300	0	Dead
17	Dec. 5, 2003	Southern Russian near Yessentuki, train (Khadijat Mangerieva)	4	3	1	41	<150	0	Dead
18	Sept. 15, 2003	Ingushetia, FSB office	2	1	1	2	31	0	Dead
19	Dec. 9, 2003	Moscow, National Hotel near Duma	1	1	0	6	14	0	Dead

	Date	Place	Total terrorists	Female terrorists	Male terrorists	Fatalities	Injured victims	Hostages	Terrorists' outcome
20	Feb. 6, 2004	Moscow subway station Avtozavodskaya	1	0	1	41	<130	0	Dead
21	April 6, 2004	Ingushetia, president's car	1	0	1	2	25	0	Dead
22	Aug. 25, 2004	Airplane TU-134 Moscow-Volgograd (Sazita Jebirhanova)	1	1	0	43	0	0	Dead
23	Aug. 25, 2004	Airplane TU-154 Moscow-Sochi (Aminat Nogaeva)	1	1	0	42	0	0	Dead
24	Aug. 31, 2004	Moscow, subway station Rijskaya	1	1	0	10	33	0	Dead
25	Sept. 1-3, 2004	North Osetia, Beslan school (Roza Nogaeva, Mariam Tuburova)	32	2	30	330	470	1120	Dead
26	May, 2005	Chechnya, Grozny	1	1	0	0	0	0	Dead
27	May, 2005	Chechnya, Assinovskaya	2	2	0	0	0	0	Dead
	Total		110	47	63	938	2473	1920	
	Percent		100%	43%	57%				

The total of forty-seven Chechen female bombers is based on reports of twenty-five successful female bombers (i.e., they detonated their bombs and died by truck, car bomb, or improvised explosive device – suicide belt or bag, including two who exploded bombs on airplanes); three unsuccessful female bombers (two exploded their devices but were wounded only; one walked away from her bomb-filled rucksack); and nineteen women who took part in the Dubrovka takeover (who wore bombs wrapped around their bodies but did not die by self-detonation). There is some controversy as to whether or not the Dubrovka bombers were indeed suicide bombers, as their plan to die by exploding themselves was interrupted by the Russian Special Forces gassing and storming the building. Instead, the females died of gunshots to the head after succumbing to the gas. We have strong confirmation from many family members, close associates, and hostages of these individuals' intent to self-detonate, as well as evidence of intent in the fact that the women were already clad with suicide belts. Thus, we take their stated intent and their behavior of strapping on bombs as strong enough evidence to classify them as suicide bombers for the purpose of this analysis. We consider this analogous to the many Palestinian bombers currently incarcerated who were thwarted in the last moments before their attempts, but who are also closely studied to understand the psychology and psycho-social aspects of suicide bombers.

We lack demographic data on all of the bombers, but of those about whom we conducted specific psychological interviews (n=34; 26 female and 8 male) the females range in age from fifteen to thirty-eight. They include both married and unmarried, and of those who were married, some were mothers while at least one suffered from infertility. Thirteen were single, three were married, four divorced, five were widows, and one was in a second marriage. As is true of suicide bombers active in other arenas,<sup>4</sup> the female bombers in our sample were as educated as their peers of the same age. More than 65 percent (65.3 percent – 17/26) had finished high school (ages 14-16, as per the Chechen system); 11.5 percent (3/26) were currently studying in college (ages 17-20); 4 percent (1/26) had finished college; and 19.2 percent (5/26) had finished their university studies (table 2).

**Table 2.** Demographic Data, Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists 2000-2005 (n=26)

Marital Status	Education Completed	Economic Status	Previous Religiosity	Relation to Wahhabism	Trauma*
13 – single	17 – high school	2 – poor	22 – secular Muslims	19 – connected after traumas	12 – more than one family member killed
3 – married	1 – college	14 – middle	4 – traditionally religious	7 – connected through family	4 – father or mother was killed
4 – divorced	5 – university	9 – good			6 – brother killed
5 – widowed	3 – in college	1 – high			1 – husband killed
1 – remarried					3 – family members arrested or disappeared after arrest
					2 – general societal traumas

\* Total greater than sample size as some individuals suffered multiple types of traumas

## Motivational Sets

### *Trauma*

As far as we could discern, none of the Chechen suicide bombers in our sample had a serious personality disorder prior to deciding to join a terror group. No less important, however, is that all individuals within the sample had experienced deep personal traumatization, and evidence of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative phenomena as a result of direct personal traumatization were present in the entire sample. This level of psychological traumatization was very likely one of the deepest leading motivational factors that drew the Chechen bombers into embracing terrorism ideologies and, ultimately, terrorist acts.<sup>5</sup>

As far as we are able to reconstruct, nearly all of the Chechen suicide bombers (male and female) followed a very similar path to becoming first radicalized and then eventually purveyors of violence. Nearly all of those we studied lost close family members in air raids, bombings, landmines, so called “cleansing” operations carried out by Russian forces, and in battle. Many personally witnessed the death, beating, or other mistreatment of a family member at the hands of the Russians. Family members and close acquaintances of the terrorists noticed that as the violent death of a family member or other societal trauma wrought a deep personal impact, the “soon to become” terrorist underwent a psychological crisis in which feelings of unresolved grief, anger, depression, psychological trauma, and guilt for not having done more to save the family member became obvious. According to the reports of family members and close associates, the following changes were observed in the female suicide bombers following their traumatic experiences: depression in 73 percent (19/26); social alienation and isolation in 92 percent (24/26); aggression in 23 percent (6/26); and repetitive talking about a strong desire for revenge in 31 percent (8/26). In the majority of cases (73 percent – 19/26), those who ultimately became bombers sought a connection to Wahhabist groups<sup>6</sup> soon after the trauma and in direct reaction to it; in a minority of cases (27 percent – 7/26) they were already affiliated with the Wahhabist groups by marriage or family ties but began to become more deeply invested in seeking the terror-promoting aspects of these groups.

### *Revenge*

It appears as if answers to the psychological trauma and a means of expressing and responding to traumatic grief were sought by the bereaved and traumatized individuals through their taking on the jihadist ideology. Indeed, this ideology met needs inherent both within the Chechen tradition of seeking revenge for the killing of a family member and as defined by general traumatic stress theory.<sup>7</sup> In Chechnya the traditional concept of revenge for social injustices enacted toward families changes dramatically in trauma victims as traumatic experiences impact on the individual’s views regarding the moral basis of revenge. Traditionally Chechens live by an ethos of revenge that mandates that when a loved one is harmed or killed, it is the responsibility of the family members to locate the evildoer and exact due recompense. This ideology of revenge is strictly codified and does not normally spread beyond seeking out the originator of the harm or his close family and requiting his evil deed. Recently, however, with widespread war, traumatization and bereavement, and the importation of a terrorist mentality this mindset is changing: revenge is becoming generalized in the minds of many. Akhmedova found in her study of 653 clinical

subjects who had undergone war traumas that those who had the highest levels of post-traumatic effects underwent a transformation in this regard. They endorsed revenge in 39 percent of the cases and no longer considered revenge as a duty to find and repay in kind the person who had harmed their family, but instead generalized their revenge to enact harm on the ethnic sector from which the harm had originated (i.e., the Russian military or civilians). With increased traumatization generalized revenge became both sufficient and acceptable. There were also positive correlations between the endorsement for revenge and increasing levels of religiosity, aggression, suspiciousness, and negativism.<sup>8</sup> We conclude that all of the women in our sample had revenge as a motive. Indeed, before their terror acts, 54 percent (14/26) of the women had stated spontaneously to those we interviewed that they would seek revenge for the violent death of their family member at the hands of the Russians.

### *Religious Ideology*

Generally a person who undergoes a deep personal trauma experiences a shattering of world assumptions<sup>9</sup> (for example, regarding personal safety, predictability, and goodness of the world) and often undergoes a dissociative response<sup>10</sup> to the trauma in which certain elements are just too emotionally overwhelming and painful to incorporate at once into one's sense of self in the world. Trauma victims are often dissociative in response to their experiences, displaying amnesia, emotional numbing, and a sense of social alienation. A huge part of the healing process in response to psychological trauma is to reconstruct both a personal narrative and a worldview that incorporates the traumatic event. A religion-based terrorist ideology that incorporates national tradition and even the obligation to avenge a family member can serve this need in the short run, providing a type of psychological first aid that is necessarily short-lived if it ends in the individual becoming a human bomber as a result.

The jihadist ideology thus provides ill-fated psychological help to the trauma victim in the short run as a result of the terror-sponsoring organization's distorted use of Islam to further its political goals. In light of the two wars over the past decade, the continued conflicts, and the current violent counterterrorism measures in Chechnya, Chechens as a whole have suffered widespread psychological traumatization. No individual or family has been untouched by the effects of carpet-bombing of cities, war, violence, and death, and nearly everyone has experienced violence of some sort. Similarly, the wars effected a demographic disaster in Chechnya during this period. Chechnya lost a huge portion of its population to death and refugees fleeing the country<sup>11</sup> – with this demographic disaster echoing past deportations, when the

Chechen nation was also decimated by Stalin's destructive deportation policies. The current widespread societal trauma provides fertile ground for some segments of society to embrace a new non-indigenous form of radicalized Islam. It is important to emphasize, however, that this occurs only in conjunction with a segment of society's acceptance of a new interpretation of Islam, one that fits a widespread societal need to respond to the violent, bereaving, and traumatic situations they have recently experienced by subscribing to a newly constructed and violent worldview.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, for those individuals whose family integrity and sense of purpose and belonging have been shattered by the violent deaths of family members, the religious aspect of the jihadist ideology assumes new prominence as it prescribes and signals through new behaviors the belonging to a group and dedication to a meaningful life commitment. Symbols of belonging include pursuing a new lifestyle and wearing clothing that signifies a new life commitment; these are important in filling a vacuum for the trauma victim who is bereaved of key family members and who has lost meaning and direction in the midst of the chaos of war and occupation. Likewise, new prayer rituals and a comforting view of an afterlife expressed in glorified terms for those who die on behalf of God (i.e., martyrs) help to calm the traumatized individual, who often in reaction to the trauma develops an expectation of a foreshortened lifespan and further violence. Similarly, turning to any religious rituals often calms states of bodily arousal and can build upon dissociative phenomena in a manner that makes the psychic numbing common in trauma victims seem like a useful measure versus an obstacle to rebuilding one's life. Turning to religion is a frequent way of comforting oneself in the face of bereavement with the belief that the person mourned lives on in some afterlife. Jihadist ideology makes use of this factor as well, stating that not only will the martyr be reunited with loved ones, but s/he can guarantee the safe passage to paradise for seventy other persons in the family – not a small feat when one feels that life is violent, chaotic, and unpredictable and death lurks everywhere.

Those in our sample as well as all other Chechen suicide terrorists whom we know of were self-recruited in the early stages of their terrorist journey. The path to terrorism nearly always begins with individuals who due to their traumatized psychological state are attracted to radical groups and seek out the jihadist ideology as they grapple with their rather extreme and violent losses. Less clear is what occurs on the side of the organization from the women's first step of joining the terror groups to actually becoming human bombers. We do know that many of the terrorists made clear to their families that in seeking out the Wahhabists, from the

outset they embraced freely and completely the jihadist ideal of becoming martyrs in the fight against the Russians. It was clear that in joining these groups and espousing the jihadist ideology, a new world view was constructed within the “would-be” bombers in which materialism was repudiated; death as a martyr was glorified; terrorist violence was justified as a means of carrying out the jihad, i.e., enacting justice (from their point of view) against the infidel invader; and the afterlife was deemed worthy compensation for sacrificing one’s life. This new worldview was generally accompanied by a total change of mentality and changes in lifestyle (praying frequently, becoming strict in following Muslim codes) and in extreme changes in appearance (the hijab for women; long shirts, shorter pants, and a beard for men). According to our respondents, all of the women in our sample became more religious following their traumatic experiences and spoke increasingly about jihad, paradise, and similar religious themes.

### *Gender*

While some, mainly Russian journalists have written that Chechen women are kidnapped, raped, and/or drugged to encourage them to take part in terror activities, we have found no evidence for this.<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, we find strong evidence of self-recruitment and strong willingness to martyr oneself on behalf of one’s country and independence from Russia, to enact social justice (in their perspective) for wrongs done to them, and to avenge for the loss of loved ones in their families. We know of only one case where a sister claimed that she was being coerced by her brother into suicide terrorism. She was from a family in which two other sisters very enthusiastically took part in suicide bombings and prior to that other terror missions. This family was split between the mother, who encouraged the children to pursue terrorism, and the father, who was angered by their activities and tried to stop them. The sister turned herself into the Russian authorities, claiming she needed protection from her coercive brother, who had already sent at least four other women as bombers – one who turned back from her mission without reprisal, and three who went very willingly (including two of her sisters). There were complicating factors in the case of some female bombers – wives whose husbands divorced them due to infertility, who perhaps as a result were more free and willing to pursue terrorism (although they still had professional lives open to them), one woman who was seriously ill, and others who were fugitives who could face fates worse than death if caught. Still, in all these cases they retained the main trauma-based motivational core and these other issues appeared to be simply supplemental motivating factors.

As far as we can tell the motivational mechanism for seeking out a terror group generated at first by deep personal traumatization did not differ by gender in any way. Both genders in our sample had suffered violent losses of family members and were overtaken by concerns for restoring social justice, something that a religious ideology often panders to and takes advantage of. Indeed as one author wrote about the Black Widows: their desperation “allows them to be deceived into being devout.”<sup>14</sup>

## **Chechen Terror Networks and Organizations**

Marc Sageman studied a select group of global salafist jihadi terrorists and wrote that one of the clearest factors inciting a potential terrorist to action is his or her relationship to a terror network: that recruitment occurs through friendship and familial relations.<sup>15</sup> We do not see this aspect as the main motivational force for Chechens, although it is definitely a factor in who becomes a terrorist. Instead we see deep personal and overwhelming psychological trauma, traumatic bereavement, symptoms of traumatic stress, and subsequent adherence to terrorist ideology as a form of psychological first aid as the main motivational set. We do, however, strongly agree that terrorist recruitment occurs through friendship and familial relations. Indeed, many of the main terrorist leaders (some now dead) married strategically in Chechnya and Ingushetia across regions that ensured that when they needed safe houses and support from the wider familial networks of their wives, they would not be refused, by virtue of the strong Chechen tradition to help family members. In our sample we found that 27 percent (7/26) of the female bombers acted in concert with other family members in carrying out a suicide attack: there were two pairs of sisters present in the Dubrovka Theater takeover; one sister exploded herself on a plane in August 2004, with her sister shortly following her lead in the Beslan school takeover; and a father, son, and daughter detonated themselves in a governmental complex in Grozny. Twenty-seven percent (7/26) of the women in our sample were married or connected by familial ties to Wahhabists prior to becoming involved in terrorism. Proximity to already active terrorists and to terrorist ideology indeed seems to be a strong factor for recruitment.

We lack detailed information as to any military/ guerrilla training the women received, as family members and close acquaintances were generally unaware of these details. It was clear to us that some though not our entire sample spent time in terrorist training camps. From family member interviews we learned that prior to taking part in a terror act some ran away to camps while others left home, ostensibly

to engage in a short buying/trading time in Moscow or elsewhere. We conjecture that training, if it occurred at all, was short, as most female bombers who left home prior to their actions usually left for extremely short periods of time prior – in general, two weeks. Thus while during the time between leaving home and traveling to the terror scene some time may have been spent in training, it is our understanding that very little training is done for Chechen bombers and that once the ideology is adopted it is simply a matter of equipping the woman with a bomb and sending her to her target.

Chechen women are much more emancipated than their Arab sisters. While family structure is still traditional, it is common for Chechen women to attend university and to hold full-time jobs outside their homes.<sup>16</sup> Journalist Barbara Victor writes that perhaps Palestinian female bombers choose suicide terrorism as a means of escaping the tight constraints of traditional roles to become in the short run and in history equal to men.<sup>17</sup> We do not see this as a viable explanation with Chechen female bombers. Indeed, during peacetime many non-traditional roles were open to them. Several in our sample were pursuing higher education and had the possibility of working in professional roles that were disrupted by war. One woman, for instance, was studying history in the university and planned to transfer to law and become a lawyer. However, the last two wars in Chechnya have disrupted most people's plans and hopes for economic or academic success.

In terms of power structure Chechen terror organizations are male-run, with women serving in subservient and traditional roles: cooking, cleaning, bandaging the wounded, nursing, and so on, although three female bombers did break out of these defined roles: one learned to shoot guns and drive, and another set of sisters learned to explode grenades, plant landmines, and shoot guns. Overall, however, Chechen women who join terror groups in Chechnya actually move backwards in some ways. They take on traditional Arab dress which has never been indigenous to Chechnya, including the hijab, and devote themselves to more traditional roles within the groups, except for when they undertake violent missions. Thus it was only when the women endured many traumas and the effects of war obstructed many of life's options that had been open to them previously, that they moved in dress and ideology into fundamentalist roles that did not even exist prior to the war, while at the same moment taking on the perhaps more emancipated roles of warriors.

When considering how Chechen terror organizations function in regard to the role of female bombers, one must keep in mind that terrorism is primarily a psychological

weapon with the goal of spawning widespread terror in a larger audience in order to create changes in public sentiment that may aid the terror organization in achieving its political goals. Palestinians only started to use women as bombers when the checkpoints became increasingly difficult for men to cross, and women initially had more success in arousing less suspicion and undergoing less rigorous searches. This was not the case for Chechens who used women bombers from the start – most likely due to their willingness, availability, high motivational status, and greater emotional impact on their target audience. Chechen terror organizations galvanized world attention by staging a spectacular drama in the Dubrovka Theater House takeover, in which nineteen women dressed in black were shown on a pre-recorded video and in news coverage horrifyingly displaying bombs prominently strapped to their bodies. Likewise, the use of women bombers on planes, trains, and in the subways has implanted in Russians a feeling of all-pervasive danger, potentially presenting anytime and anywhere, from the gentler of genders. Not only does this create a sense of horror in the wider audience, but it has caused some to question what drives Chechen women to such desperate measures.

In terms of organizational structures, we learned that the decision-making, routes to, and motives for becoming a bomber appear to be very similar among male and female terrorists, but that the men are in charge and they give the orders. It was clear from our hostage interviews that the women terrorists in the Moscow siege were clearly in a subservient role to the men. This may have even played out in how it ended. When the Russians stormed the theater the men left the main hall to fight and the women remained behind with the bombs, which they lacked authority to detonate. Whether they were able to make this decision on their own is unknown, as they lost their chance to detonate when the gas overtook them.<sup>18</sup> Likewise whenever Chechen women have traveled to carry out a terror act, they travel with an older woman or appropriate chaperone. In other words, traditional roles of protecting women are still preserved up to the point where she sacrifices herself for the group.

## **Religious Ideology**

Chechen suicide terrorism is bound to Wahhabist terror ideology. All but one female bomber whom we know of had deeply embraced the Wahhabist jihadist ideology, which in Chechnya is used to justify terrorism as a means of enacting revenge and social justice and acting on behalf of a nationalist separatist movement. All were extremely dedicated to their cause and successful in their mission, the exception being a woman who did not carry out her act and who appears to have been motivated by

criminal concerns more than terrorist ideology. This woman is Zarema Mujikhoeva who put her bomb down on a Moscow street and walked away from it. She was later arrested and told many false stories to the police and journalists about coercion in the Chechen groups that she subsequently admitted were inaccurate. Many analysts of Chechen female bombers rely solely on her accounts, despite the fact that they were in the main false and certainly not typical of other women's stories.

In accordance with the global salafi jihadist ideology promoted by al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, and others, Wahhabist terrorist ideology in Chechnya glorifies martyrdom and promotes jihad on behalf of creating a global Muslim caliphate. Prior to the first war in Chechnya this type of Islam was not present. It was imported from Arab regions through al-Qaeda-type terror networks that were active in building mosques and madrassas throughout Chechnya and spreading their form of Islam.<sup>19</sup>

The Russian government often claims that the Chechen terror movement exists due to outside funding and forces, but this ignores the very real human rights abuses occurring in Chechnya that continue to fuel terror acts as well as the nationalist separatist dream.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the separatist movement began as a completely secular one, yet when the Chechen separatists were faced with the overwhelming force of the Russian military, the carpet-bombing of Grozny, and other displays of exceptional power, they found themselves increasingly trapped into accepting help from religiously oriented groups that promoted a terrorist ideology. Hence while one sees an ideology that accords with the global salafi jihad, in Chechnya it is focused mainly on recruiting on behalf of a nationalist cause and independence from what is seen as a brutal, repressive regime, although this cause is now spreading throughout the Caucasus region as well.<sup>21</sup> As the motivations for the bombings derive in the most part from the dynamics of the conflict, and achieving worldwide Muslim domination has never been the Chechen separatist aim, it is not likely that suicide bombings would continue if Chechnya achieved a real negotiated peace with Russia, including withdrawals of troops and federal forces.

## **Community Support for Female Suicide Terrorism**

There is currently very little community support for suicide terrorism in Chechnya, male or female. While the entire Chechen population has been devastated by war and human rights violations, most Chechens still believe in civil society and hope for peace. They do not expect good results from terrorism and condemn the terror groups and bombers. This condemnation cuts across genders and there is neither more nor less support for female or male bombers, as far as we can see. The thirty-

four Chechen close associates and family members of the suicide terrorists were hard-pressed to support their family members and friends. Twenty-one percent (7/34) expressed pity for the suicide terrorists; 23 percent (8/34) expressed not pity but understanding of the suicide terrorists' motives; 44 percent (15/34) felt the bombers were used by terrorist organizations and/or the FSB (formerly the KGB); and 12 percent (4/34) went so far as to criticize the suicide terrorists directly. An overwhelming 59 percent of respondents (20/34, though not all of the 34 were asked specifically about hostages) spontaneously expressed pity for the hostages of suicide terrorists.

In many ways this lack of widespread community support for suicide terrorism is similar to Palestinian society during the time period between the first and second intifadas, but over time a cult of martyrdom that generated posters, videos, songs, and societal glorification grew up in Palestinian society in support of suicide terrorism. It is possible that given conditions of continued human rights violations, the same could occur in Chechnya over time. Those sectors of society that do glorify the bombers have already made a song in memory of the first female bomber, Khava Barayeva, which enjoys popularity among Chechen youth. Hence it appears that while Palestinians and other fundamentalist Muslim groups were loath to use women as bombers and only used them as a last resort when they became an expedient means of crossing increasingly closed borders, the Chechen terror groups found no barriers to using women from the start. This is likely because Chechen women prior to the war already enjoyed a Soviet-type of feminism in terms of equality in education and opportunity to work in many professions. Thus from the outset to volunteer as bombers alongside the men is in keeping with their more egalitarian occupational traditions.

## Conclusion

Chechen women have been active from the first as suicide bombers. They do not appear coerced, drugged, or otherwise enticed into these acts. On the contrary, they are self-recruited on the basis of seeking a means of enacting social justice, revenge, and warfare against what they perceive as their nation's enemy. All the women in our sample had been deeply personally traumatized and bereaved by violent deaths in their near families or all about them, and we believe this formed the basis for their self-recruitment into terrorist organizations. Trauma alone, however, would not have motivated them into terrorism: it had to be coupled with a terror promoting ideology espoused by an organization able to equip the women to act. Indeed, all of

the women in our sample were religiously motivated by Wahhabist violent jihadist ideology and were seeking to become martyrs, believing they would be reunited with loved ones in paradise and enjoy the benefits of their family members being admitted to paradise as a result of their act.

While Wahhabists terror groups have managed to radicalize a small segment of Chechen society, the majority of Chechen women (and society as a whole) does not currently support suicide terrorism. They support civil society and want to see an end to the conflicts and violent counterterrorism operations, valuing these as much higher goals than achieving national independence. Nevertheless, an extremely small group of radicalized Chechens continues to be a severe threat. As Ramzan Kadyrov, vice premier of the Russian-backed Chechen government said in his interview to Chechen TV on May 11, 2005, Chechen women are the most dangerous for national security because they have carried out the most risky operations. If the current trend continues, Chechen female bombers will continue to be a grave threat to Russian national security.

## Notes

- 1 We have classified suicide bombers as anyone who goes so far as to strap on a bomb or drive a vehicle filled with explosives to a target, or who otherwise attempts to detonate an explosive device on an airplane or elsewhere with the aim of dying to kill, irrespective of whether or not the bomber actually died in the attack or was successful in detonating – as that is often not within the bomber’s control. We take the point of strapping on a bomb or other type of improvised explosive device or driving a vehicle loaded with explosives to a target as enough evidence of seriousness of the intent to commit suicide, and we see the end result, which is often out of the hands of the bomber, as less meaningful than the intent implied by these actions.
- 2 These numbers are based upon our database of attacks attributed to Chechens as of late June 2005. Quantifying the exact number of attacks, gender of bombers, and so on is difficult as reports vary by government and news source and the gender of accomplished bombers is not always evident after an attack. In every case we have used the more conservative estimates, as our experience with journalists reporting in and about Chechnya is that they have difficulty getting reports and sometimes rely on rumors. See table 1 for a complete account regarding suicide terror acts attributed to Chechens.
- 3 See Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), in which he discusses the concept of a psychological autopsy following a normal suicide. Shneidman also coined the term “psyche ache,” psychic pain referring to deeply felt

emotions that are painful to the individual. He argued that the best predictor of an individual's propensity to suicide is when emotional pain is experienced as overwhelming and inescapable.

- 4 See Scott Atran, "Genesis of Suicide Terrorism," *Science* 200 (March 2003): 534; also Scott Atran, "Mishandling Suicide Terrorism," *The Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2004): 67-90.
- 5 See Anne Speckhard & Khapta Akhmedova, "Mechanisms of Generating Suicide Terrorism: Trauma and Bereavement as Psychological Vulnerabilities in Human Security – The Chechen Case," in Jill Donnelly, ed. NATO Science Series, Brussels, 2004 for an additional discussion of this factor in regard to Chechens; Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, "Talking to Terrorists," *Journal of Psychohistory* (Fall 2005); and Anne Speckhard, "Understanding Suicide Terrorism: Countering Human Bombs and their Senders," in *Topics in Terrorism: Toward a Transatlantic Consensus on the Nature of the Threat*, vol. I, eds. Jason S. Purcell and Joshua D. Weintraub, Atlantic Council Publication, 2005.
- 6 Wahhabism is a non-indigenous form of Islam originating in the Arabian Peninsula in the eighteenth century from a reformist movement begun by Mohamed ibn abd al Wahhab (1703-1791) to return Islam to its original purity. Wahhab based his ideas on a strict interpretation of the Qur'an and his movement had as its central tenant the oneness of God. He condemned idolatry in all forms as well as anything that could possibly be interpreted as an intermediary to God, ordering the destruction of sacred tombs, shrines, and so on. He also not only allowed, but also called for waging war on fellow Muslims who had reverted back to a state of jahiliyyah – the state of barbarism and ignorance that prevailed in the Arabian Peninsula prior to Mohammed's revelations. Wahhabism as a belief system, although not in itself necessarily militant, is the subset of Islam that has been used to inform the terrorist ideology, which lies at the base of the current worldwide salafi jihad. Wahhabism, interpreted in its most radical and militant type, also forms the ideological underpinning of Chechen terror groups. While the label Wahhabism denotes a totally other and neutral meaning in the Gulf States and elsewhere in the world, it should be understood that in Russia, Chechnya, the Caucuses, and the other former Soviet Union republics this label denotes an ultra-militant form of Islam and refers to militant religious groups that promote jihad and terrorism – so much so that in Russian the word "wahhabist" has become synonymous with terrorist. For the purposes of this paper we adhere to the Russian meaning of the word as it is understood in the Chechen context: we refer to Wahhabists in Chechnya as those groups that have formed according to a militant interpretation of Islam that promotes jihad and allows for and promotes terrorism. By doing so we mean no offense to Wahhabists who practice Islam peacefully in other parts of the world (or in Chechnya for that matter), and we fully acknowledge that this term has an entirely other, peaceful meaning outside of Chechnya.
- 7 See Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, "The New Chechen Jihad: Militant Wahhabism as a Radical Movement and a Source of Suicide Terrorism in Post-War

- Chechen Society," *Democracy and Security* 2 (2006): 1-53; Anne Speckhard and Khapta Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 5 (2006): 1-65; and Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "Mechanisms of Generating Suicide Terrorism."
- 8 K. Akhmedova, "Fanatism and Revenge Idea of Civilians who had PTSD," *Social and Clinical Psychiatry* 12, no. 3 (2003): 24-32. See also Anne Speckhard, Ken Reidy, Val Vanrompay, and Beatrice Jacuch, "Taking on the Persona of a Suicide Bomber: A Thought Experiment," unpublished research paper, 2005, for a discussion of revenge seeking in normal subjects taking part in a fantasy exercise.
  - 9 R. Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
  - 10 According to the American Psychiatric Association, dissociation is often a psychological symptom following deep traumatization. The essential feature of dissociation is "a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity or perception of the environment," American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed., Washington, DC, 1994. In the case of suicide terrorism, this means an emotional barrier is unconsciously erected, walling off the negative emotions generated by choosing to die in this manner and may even include compartmentalizing the event from one's ambitions and daily life. One Palestinian bomber, for example, when planning his attack, suggested that he could not carry a bomb until after his university exams – suggesting that while on the one hand he acknowledged that he was going to his death, he was able separate this reality so completely from his mind that he still felt that the need to complete his exams prior to going to explode himself. For a more complete discussion of this concept in relation to suicide terrorism see Speckhard and Akhmedova, "Mechanisms of Generating Suicide Terrorism" for an additional discussion of this factor in regard to Chechens; Speckhard and Akhmedova, "Talking to Terrorists"; Speckhard, "Understanding Suicide Terrorism: Countering Human Bombs and their Senders"; and Speckhard, Reidy, Vanrompay, and Jacuch, "Taking on the Persona of a Suicide Bomber: A Thought Experiment."
  - 11 See John Reuter, "Chechnya's Suicide Bombers: Desperate, Devout, or Deceived?" The American Committee for Peace in Chechnya publication, 2004, p. 21: "Having witnessed the almost total obliteration of their country in the past decade, the Chechen people have suffered immeasurably. This tiny mountain nation has endured an apocalyptic demographic crisis, with nearly **180,000 Chechens killed and over 300,000 displaced**. These unfathomable numbers mean that one in two Chechens were either killed or driven from their homes in the past ten years. Moreover, Chechnya's cities have been reduced to rubble and the extent of the environmental catastrophe is yet to be fully understood. Every single person alive today in Chechnya has been deeply scarred by the bloody conflict raging in their midst." <http://www.peaceinchechnya.org/reports/>

- SuicideReport/, accessed June 1, 2005,
- 12 See Nichole Argo, "Culture, Society and Martyrdom," unpublished research paper, 2004; Speckhard, "Understanding Suicide Terrorism: Countering Human Bombs and their Senders."
  - 13 Zarema Mujikhoeva, the only bomber who did not carry out her act at the last moment, began the rumor of Black Fatima, an older woman that she claimed followed behind the female bombers to make sure they detonated and who was said to be able to detonate by remote. Mujikhoeva later discredited herself and admitted to lying, which was obvious from the fact that if Black Fatima actually existed it's very unlikely Mujikhoeva would have been able to put her bomb-filled rucksack down and walk away from it without it being detonated by remote by this phantom figure.
  - 14 See Reuter, "Chechnya's Suicide Bombers: Desperate, Devout, or Deceived?": "The primary characteristic that differentiates the majority of Chechen suicide attackers from other suicide attackers around the world is the prominent role desperation and grief play in precipitating vulnerability to suicide terrorism. In most cases, all that is missing is a skilled recruiter that can operationalize these emotions and turn disenchanting Chechen women into radical shakhidi. As it turns out, Chechen suicide bombers are not wholly desperate, devout, or deceived, but instead they are desperate which allows them to be deceived into being devout," p. 19.
  - 15 See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Also see J. Post, E. Sprinzak, and L. Denny, "The Terrorists in Their Own Words: Interviews with 35 Incarcerated Middle Eastern Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 1 (2003): 171-84 for a discussion of group dynamics and identity needs as motivational factors for joining and staying in a terror cell.
  - 16 Within their homes Chechen women, like most women in the world, still do the majority of housework, cleaning, cooking, and childrearing tasks.
  - 17 See Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (Rodale Books, 2003). Speckhard interviewed many of the same families Victor interviewed and received a very different explanation. Hence while it's possible that feminist concerns – especially blocked social roles, the need to hide pregnancies or affairs – can be operational, Speckhard found these Palestinian women to have other issues than feminism as their main motivations.
  - 18 See Anne Speckhard, "Soldiers for God: A Study of the Suicide Terrorists in the Moscow Hostage Taking Siege," in *The Roots of Terrorism: Contemporary Trends and Traditional Analysis*, ed. Oliver McTernan, NATO Science Series, Brussels, 2004; Anne Speckhard, Nadejda Tarabrina, Valery Krasnov, and Khapta Akhmedova, "Research Note: Observations of Suicidal Terrorists in Action," in *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 2 (2004): 305-27; Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism"; A. Speckhard, N. Tarabrina, V. Krasnov, and N. Mufel, "Posttraumatic and

Acute Stress Responses in Hostages held by Suicidal Terrorists in the Takeover of a Moscow Theater," *Traumatology* 11, no. 1 (2005); A. Speckhard, N. Tarabrina, V. Krasnov, and N. Mufel, "Stockholm Effects and Psychological Responses to Captivity in Hostages Held by Suicidal Terrorists," *Traumatology*: 11, no. 2 (2005, reprinted in S. Wessely & V. Krasnov, eds., *Psychological Responses to the New Terrorism: A NATO Russia Dialogue*, 2005, IOS Press). It should also be noted that rumours abound about this terror event. Some claim that since the male leadership of the terrorists in the Dubrovka Theater were calling on mobile phones to associates outside of the theater they, as well as the women, may have been waiting for orders about when to detonate the bombs, and lacking this outside order, the women failed to detonate. In either case the women were submissive to male orders.

- 19 Many of these madrassas targeted and preyed upon war widows and their young children, inviting the children to study for free, knowing that being fatherless because of the war they would be more receptive to the jihadist ideology. Nowadays these mosques and madrassas have been shut down by the Russians. See Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, "The New Chechen Jihad: Militant Wahhabism as a Radical Movement and a Source of Suicide Terrorism in Post-War Chechen Society," *Democracy and Security* 2 (2006): 1-53.
- 20 Dmitri Trenin, Aleksei Malashenko, and Anatol Lieven, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004); and Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism Studies in Conflict and Terrorism."
- 21 See Speckhard and Akhmedova, "The New Chechen Jihad: Militant Wahhabism as a Radical Movement and a Source of Suicide Terrorism in Post-War Chechen Society."

# **Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?**

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**Arjuna Gunawardena**

## **Suicide Cadres within the LTTE**

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is a secular separatist terrorist organization in Sri Lanka whose goal is the establishment of an independent state of Tamil Eelam. Often considered the most ruthless terrorist organization in the world, the LTTE has used lethal force indiscriminately, and has in fact killed more Tamils (including Tamil politicians and leaders and members of other militant groups) than Sinhalese or the military. The organization has a centralized command structure under the direction of the national leader, Vellupullai Prabhakaran, and encompasses various operational/service wings and units. Each branch of service is divided by gender and has a secondary gender-based leadership, i.e., women's military leader or women's Sea Tiger leader, so that women cadres are under the operational control of the respective wing/unit leader, but under the administrative control of the women's wing leader.

The LTTE did not pioneer the concept of martyrdom, but it successfully realized its efficacy and pursued it. The Black Tigers, the suicide terrorists within the LTTE, are not grouped in a separate unit, rather are integral members of any particular host LTTE wing/unit. And while all LTTE cadres carry a cyanide capsule to commit suicide rather than be captured,<sup>1</sup> they are not all suicide terrorists. Instead, "Black Tigers"<sup>2</sup> is a generic designation of all suicide cadres of the LTTE, those who set out intentionally to sacrifice their lives as an integral part of their mission.

The first LTTE suicide operation occurred on July 5, 1987. In an effort to offset heavy losses to the Sri Lankan army offensive, an explosives-filled truck was driven by a Tiger volunteer. Significant here is that circumstances, rather than ideology, dictated the operation; that is, operational exigencies prompted the attack, and indeed, during the period of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) – from July 1987

to March 1990 – there were no suicide bombings.<sup>3</sup> The LTTE had not yet adopted suicide terrorism as an organizational ideal and had not yet established the Black Tiger suicide cadres, even though the concept of self-sacrificial attacks and pre-emptive suicide was very much a part of the LTTE ethos.

On July 10, 1990, following the withdrawal of the IPKF and exactly a month after the outbreak of hostilities between the LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka, a Sea Tiger craft rammed a Sri Lankan naval craft, which then exploded. While there was some ambiguity as to whether this was indeed a Black Tiger suicide attack, there is no doubt that the attack on November 22, 1990 was a Black Tiger suicide attack,<sup>4</sup> when an explosives-laden truck driven by a male LTTE suicide bomber was used to spearhead the attack on the Mankulam army camp. The adoption of suicide terrorism came at a time when the LTTE, rebounding back from the attrition suffered during the IPKF period and after having decimated other Tamil groups, required a force multiplier to take on the government forces. It was in the post-IPKF period that the term “Black Tiger” came to be used.

A supportive collective environment has been carefully cultivated by the LTTE within the society over a period of more than two decades. In the context of the Black Tigers this is one of the most important motivational imperatives that encourage volunteers to the Black Tigers rather than religion, cause, mystic indoctrination, or individual personality characteristics. The LTTE has no political ideology (other than its separatist-nationalist stance) and is very much a grievance-based organisation. Therefore, the Black Tigers are used to fill this vacuum as a pseudo-ideology of sorts.

As for the cadres themselves, there is little evidence that Black Tigers have any psychological disorders or are mentally imbalanced. Research has revealed that while it may appear to be a rational choice by the individual – to volunteer to die-to-kill – there are many other factors that come into play in the individual’s decision in becoming a suicide terrorist. Societal and peer pressure, social stigma by the dishonor bought about by refusal to become one, the social conditioning of Tamil society, and even economic reasons, all contribute. Self-sacrificial service has become a norm rather than an exceptional act, and is an outward display of commitment to the leader, the organization, and the cause.

More than 316 Black Tigers have been killed over the years, including those who were killed by accidental explosions and training accidents. While the Sri Lankan military hypothesizes that the majority of the Black Sea Tigers are LTTE battle casualties who are seriously disabled, this has yet to be substantiated by empirical

evidence. A summary of the numbers by service and gender provides a picture of the distribution and ratio of male to female. The LTTE's own numbers differ, in that they acknowledge only 273 killed. Of these, 196 were reportedly Black Sea Tigers, of whom fifty-six were said to be female. Of the remaining seventy-seven (i.e., Military Wing Black Tigers), eighteen were said to be female. The LTTE does not acknowledge the Intelligence Wing Black Tiger operations.

**Table 1.** Black Tiger (BT) Attacks and Casualties, 1987-2006

Service Wing	Number of Black Tiger's Killed				Attacks		
	Male	Female	?	Total	% of TTL	No	% of TTL
Military Wing BTs	58	18	3	79	25.00	30	23.62%
Black Sea Tigers	125	48	0	173	54.75	62	48.82%
Intelligence Wing BTs	44	9	11	64	20.25	35	27.56%
Totals	227	75	14	316		127+	

? Gender has not been confirmed yet

+ Does not include accidental explosions, etc.

## A Different Breed?

Women entered Tamil militancy seven years after their male counterparts, and females were involved on the periphery of Tamil militancy until 1983, mostly in supportive logistical roles. The recruitment of women to the LTTE combat units expanded during and after the IPKF period, and was clearly more for military operational needs<sup>5</sup> than any drive to empower Tamil women. From the women's perspective, ideological, i.e., nationalist, and personal motivations appear to be the stronger imperatives, rather than feminism.<sup>6</sup> According to Alston, however, the LTTE's female cadres also represent a type of feminist ideology, bolstering the LTTE contention that female emancipation is one of the key benefits it has achieved. While it has been estimated that a third of the combat strength of the LTTE are women,<sup>7</sup> with the LTTE themselves claiming it is 50 percent, the actual number might be closer to between 20-30 percent.<sup>8</sup> Approximately 6,000 females cadres are said to have been killed in combat;<sup>9</sup> although according to Thamilini, the women's leader of their Political Wing, about 5,000 women have been killed out of an estimated 18,000+ LTTE cadres killed during the conflict. Considering that female cadres are invariably either spearheading attacks or are often in the thick of the battle, the casualty count does not necessarily match the 1:3 ratio of female to male cadres.

It has been suggested that most women who join the LTTE do so out of a drive for liberation from traditional Hindu/Tamil cultural restrictions, in other words, female emancipation. This was cited as the reason female LTTE cadres are referred to as “Freedom Birds.” However, the term “Freedom Birds” was more a political and propaganda ploy of the LTTE than an instrument promoting empowerment and emancipation of women.<sup>10</sup> On the ground neither they nor the female suicide cadres were referred to as such, despite erroneous claims to that effect.<sup>11</sup> Nor were the female Black Tigers – sometimes referred to in the media as “Black Tigresses” – called the “Birds of Paradise.”<sup>12</sup> The term “Freedom Birds” was propagated by Adele Balasingham<sup>13</sup> as a generic name synonymous with the female cadres of the LTTE. But this is again part of the spin that the LTTE created, since women’s emancipation is touted both as an achievement and direct result of the LTTE’s liberation struggle (freedom from economic, political and social “bondage”<sup>14</sup> is espoused by the LTTE in its propaganda) in an effort to generate much-needed recruits to the LTTE.

The first successful female Black Tiger operation was the assassination of Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi on May 21, 1991 in Sriperunpudur, India. Considering the time it initially took to select and train Black Tiger cadres, female cadres may have been selected from the early stages of the adoption of suicide terrorism, around the beginning of 1990. Though there has been much hype about the number of females in the ranks of the Black Tigers, statistically they constitute about 24 percent of the 316 who were killed and identified as being Black Tigers, not including Black Tiger cadres arrested/captured and those known to be Black Tigers who committed suicide by taking cyanide. The number of Black Tiger cadres that neither killed themselves nor were captured is also unknown, and this presents difficulties in interpreting numbers and female representation.

The female suicide bomber in the context of the Tamil Tigers has more than political and organizational underpinnings. The social and cultural backdrop allows a fuller understanding of the phenomenon:

The self-sacrifice of the female bombers is almost an extension of the idea of motherhood in the Tamil culture, [as] in this strongly patriarchal society, Tamil mothers make great sacrifices for their sons on a daily basis; feeding them before themselves or the girl children, serving them and so on. Acting as a human bomb is an understood and accepted offering for a woman who will never be a mother.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, in the past, there was no evidence to suggest that any of the female Black Tigers were mothers or for that matter married. In the case of male suicide

bombers, married suicide bombers were a rarity, though a few existed. However, in the April 25, 2006 attack on the commander of the Sri Lanka armed forces, it was alleged that the suicide bomber was a pregnant woman.

To de Mel, “the woman suicide bomber refutes conventional notions that women are essentially pacifist and peace-loving by nature.”<sup>16</sup> She questioned whether the woman suicide bomber’s “act of destruction [is] a moment of victimhood or agency? As she explodes, is she both a victim *and* an agent of change? And what does she signify for the struggles for women’s empowerment and the future of the women’s movement?” According to Clara Beyler,

There is a difference between men and women suicide attackers: women consider combat as a way to escape the predestined life that is expected of them. When women become human bombs, their intent is to make a statement not only in the name of a country, a religion, a leader, but also in the name of their gender.<sup>17</sup>

Beyler argued that this stems from the fact that a patriarchal structure dominates the societies in which suicide terrorists originate, including Kurd, Tamil, Palestinian, and Arab. However, LTTE women’s cadres were inducted to active combat units in equal fashion as the male cadres, received the same training, and were expected to perform equally well. The LTTE has spared no pains to assert that by this women were emancipated. Therefore, gender equality has already been established and does not require the extreme measure of women dying by suicide bombing missions to prove that they are equal to men. At the same time, Beyler also suggests that “a great number of LTTE women are victims of rape and that becoming a suicide bomber is the only redeeming option left.” Yet while there have been instances of rape, in the known cases the victims did not become Black Tigers or even members of the LTTE. This was a myth advanced by the LTTE itself for disinformation purposes, but finds little corroboration in reality. While alleged rapes of Tamil females by the Sri Lanka armed forces were reported, with some culprits brought before the law and convicted of such crimes, the incidents have been few and far between. The Sri Lanka military, which has been in combat continually for the past three decades, has matured and become more professional, and understands the importance of winning the hearts and minds of the Tamil populace, as much as winning battles in the overall effort in the war against separatist terrorism. During the IPKF period, rape of Sri Lankan Tamil females was rampant. This contributed significantly towards the militarization of Northern and Eastern Tamil females who flocked to the LTTE for both protection

and a chance to hit back at the IPKF. However, there is little evidence to suggest or support the contention that females raped by the IPKF turned to suicide terrorism as a means of revenge or as a redeeming option.

The utilitarian value of female terrorists because of certain particular characteristics, i.e. practicality, coolness, dedication, inner strength, ruthlessness, and single-mindedness, has been posited.<sup>18</sup> A dissenting view contends that “to view the female suicide bomber purely in terms of utilitarian purposes would diminish its true effectiveness. In reality, the female suicide bomber’s covert function is a liberating tool that challenges the inequality and subordinate status of women in Muslim society.”<sup>19</sup> How far this is true in Tamil society, which is conservative and traditionalist and somewhat similar to Muslim society, is a question that must be addressed, keeping in mind the organizational characteristics of the organization that operates the female suicide cadres, the LTTE. The LTTE’s consideration of women’s emancipation has always been subordinate to the overarching goal of Tamil Eelam. Utility is the rationale more than any other motive. The women, particularly in leadership positions, toe the LTTE line and pay lip service to the “struggle for emancipation,” but the reality is different.

There are indeed practical advantages that females have over the males. These include “tactical advantages conferred by their seemingly innocent outward appearance and the universal perception of their non-violent character. These enable them more easily to bypass security measures and (security) personnel less suspicious of their intentions. These considerations must overcome the inhibitions grounded in the norms regarding the status of women in the traditional societies in which they operate.”<sup>20</sup> Another aspect in the use of female perpetrators in suicide terrorism that has received little attention is that women’s participation is not just a means, but an end in itself. By portraying the participation of the “weaker” sex as the victim of circumstances (e.g., rape) that drove these women to desperate measures, women are in fact used (or abused) as a justification for suicide terrorism, or at the very least in the case of the LTTE to make Black Tiger operations/suicide terrorism acceptable to the world at large. This disinformation was the main justification put forward by the LTTE for the suicide attack on Rajiv Gandhi, wherein the bomber was portrayed as the victim of an IPKF rape and that the attack was more her personal vendetta rather than a politically motivated assassination. What is less publicized is that on this occasion, there were two female suicide bombers tasked for this target – the second as a standby in reserve. The high level of planning and organizing that was revealed in subsequent investigations clearly refutes this absurd claim.<sup>21</sup>

"Rebel groups deliberately use personal distress to recruit women because theatrical acts of female suicide bombing with overtones of martyrdom and national liberation receive immense media coverage and widespread public attention."<sup>22</sup> Additionally, suicide terrorism in general and female suicide bombers in particular are used to increase a group's legitimacy in the eyes of the movement's own supporters. Stern raised concerns that terrorist profiling takes into consideration male perpetrators rather than female and this is a deficiency in the counterterrorist mechanisms of security forces in the West.<sup>23</sup> Terrorists will no doubt use such loopholes to breach security and conduct suicide terrorist attacks.

However, as in the case of the Chechen Black Widows, who have aroused in the Russian security forces and intelligence organizations a heightened awareness, the attention of the Sri Lankan intelligence and security forces over the years has come to address the female suicide bomber threat – particularly in off-battlefield areas, e.g., Colombo and in VIP protection. This has more to do with the reality of suicide terrorism in Sri Lanka than any particular difference attributed to the female of the suicide terrorist species. Therefore, one might add that the advantages previously enjoyed by female suicide cadres in Sri Lanka have been offset to some extent by the increased awareness and attention they have brought upon themselves.

Yet heightened awareness notwithstanding, lack of training tends to permit suicide terrorist attacks anyway, as was demonstrated when a female Black Tiger was taken into custody on suspicion and blew herself up inside a Colombo police station in July 2004. In the attack on the commander of the Sri Lanka armed forces inside the high security army headquarters complex on April 25, 2006, the thirty-four year old suicide bomber, Kanapathipillai Manjula Devi, was allegedly pregnant. Posing as the wife of a soldier on her way to the maternity clinic, this cover story enabled her to gain relatively easy access into the high security complex where the army hospital is located. On at least two previous occasions she had gained access to the complex on the same basis, had not gone to the maternity clinic itself, and used the opportunity to stake out her the target ground. Subsequent investigations in fact confirmed that she was not pregnant and that it was a clever disguise. Despite the lax security, the attack itself failed, and with it the LTTE lost a great deal strategically, including the supportive environment it enjoyed from its own Tamil constituency in the areas they controlled. Women are traditionally seen as "life-givers" rather than "life-takers": the LTTE has turned them into human bombs. Although sending a female to self-destruct as a suicide bomber in itself departs from accepted conventions, against the backdrop of a three decade old ethnic conflict, it was condoned as a sacrifice,

a necessity of circumstances, as an asymmetrical response to the much stronger adversary, the Sri Lanka military. However, the revulsion at the decision of using a “pregnant” woman has had adverse effects on the LTTE, both from the international community as well as from within the Tamil community itself.

According to Ayers,

Terrorist organizations have a choice whether to adopt suicide bombing or restrict themselves to conventional bombing tactics...most suicide bombings occur in “marginal” democracies or authoritarian regimes demonstrating that perhaps repressive societal conditions play a greater role in choosing suicide bombing....The presence of repressive conditions is a necessary condition for terrorist organizations to develop cults of martyrdom capable of successfully recruiting suicide bombers.<sup>24</sup>

If repressive conditions support the recruiting and perpetuation of suicide terrorism, then the opposite – tolerant conditions – should have the opposite positive effect. During the past decade or so, there has been greater movement by successive governments towards addressing the root causes of the ethnic problem and devolving administrative and political power to the provinces/regions.

The low-key commemoration of Black Tiger Day on July 5, 2006 indicated the LTTE’s appreciation of the reality on the ground, namely, the changing perceptions of its constituency. However, the rhetoric remains intransigent and the importance of retaining the Black Tigers was expounded by the LTTE leadership as “an indispensable weapon in the LTTE arsenal who had played a decisive role.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the message had just been transmitted nine days prior, when on June 26, 2006, a Black Tiger on an explosive-laden motorbike rode into the car of the third highest ranking army officer, Deputy Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Parami Kulathunga,<sup>26</sup> killing him and several others, including a civilian on his way to work.

Together with the practical difficulties posed by heightened awareness of the threat posed by female Black Tigers and resulting greater alertness of security forces, and the adverse repercussions of the “pregnant” suicide bomber, the peace dividend of a forbearing atmosphere resulting from almost three years of the ceasefire augers well for the future of countering the LTTE Black Tigress threat. Despite the hype, the numbers clearly indicate that female suicide bombers have not been a significantly greater threat than their male counterparts in Sri Lanka. Nor is there an appreciable difference between the male and female Black Tigers. There are indications that their utility value to the LTTE, as well as the prospects of promulgating the use of female

suicide bombers is waning, despite reports from an arrested alleged female Black Tiger of twelve female suicide cadres who have been tasked to attack VIP targets in the deep south.<sup>27</sup> However, suicide attacks from their male counterparts remain an evermore increasing threat in the escalating intensity of the conflict, despite the ceasefire agreement., particularly against high profile targets, i.e., political and military leadership, critical infrastructure, and economically sensitive targets.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

- 1 LTTE leader Vellupullai Prabhakaran claimed that he conceived of the concept of the cyanide capsule after Sivakumaran, a Tamil militant, took cyanide in 1974 and became the first “martyr.” Ten years later, Prabhakaran institutionalized the practice and included the cyanide capsule among the standard equipment issued to LTTE cadres.
- 2 Contrary to media and current literature. See P. Chalk, “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’s (LTTE) International Organization and Operations – A Preliminary Analysis,” Commentary no, 77, a Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Unclassified Publication, 1999.
- 3 This despite that the LTTE threatened the IPKF with suicide attacks. See M. R. N. Swamy, *Tigers of Lanka: From Boys to Guerillas* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2004), pp. 267, 276. Thus, contrary to generally held view and LTTE propaganda (Anton Balasingham, *War and Peace: Armed Struggle and Peace Efforts of Liberation Tigers*, Mitcham: Fairfax Publishing, 2004, p. 97), the July 1987 attack was just a one-time operation.
- 4 Photographs taken of the ‘last supper’ with Prabhakaran and other hallmarks of the Black Tiger hype were clearly in place on this occasion.
- 5 M. Alsion, “Armed Violence and Poverty in Sri Lanka,” (University of Warwick: Centre of International Cooperation and Security, 2004), [http://www.bradford.ac.uk/acad/cics/publications/avpi/AVPI\\_Sri\\_Lanka.pdf](http://www.bradford.ac.uk/acad/cics/publications/avpi/AVPI_Sri_Lanka.pdf).
- 6 Alsion, “Armed Violence and Poverty in Sri Lanka.”
- 7 D. Filkins, “Sri Lanka Women at War,” *Herald Tribune*, March 13, 2000.
- 8 Alsion, “Armed Violence and Poverty in Sri Lanka,” and J. Kainz, “Women Warriors,” Focus Asia: Interview of Female LTTE Cadres, July 25, 2004 , <http://www.focusasiatv.org/archive.php>.
- 9 Alsion, “Armed Violence and Poverty in Sri Lanka.”
- 10 The term was adopted from the title of a journal *Suthanthirap Paravaikal* (Freedom Birds), first published in December 1984.
- 11 For example, C. L Joshi, “Sri Lanka: Suicide Bombers,” *Far East Economic Review*, June 1, 2000, [http://www.fae.com/\\_0006\\_01/p64currents.html](http://www.fae.com/_0006_01/p64currents.html).
- 12 Mia Bloom, “Devising a Theory of Suicide Terror,” Center for Global Security and Democracy, Rutgers University , p. 13.

- 13 Adele Balasingham, *The Will to Freedom: An Inside View of Tamil Resistance*, 2nd ed. (Mitcham, Fairmax Publishing, 2003).
- 14 Besides the conservative and religious aspects of Tamil/Hindu culture, traditions such as the caste and dowry systems were also considered elements of female bondage. The stated policy of the LTTE does not recognize or permit caste restrictions and the dowry system in the areas controlled by the LTTE. However, the reality of Tamil society makes this ban almost impossible to enforce and continues. While outward appearances have indeed changed – from *sari* to trousers – despite the LTTE’s public stand and the freedom LTTE female cadres have allegedly earned for themselves, little has changed in the deep-rooted caste system and dowry is now demanded in the form of a “bridal gift.”
- 15 Mangalika Silva, “Co-ordinator, Women for Peace,” quoted in Ana Cutter, “Tamil Tigresses, Hindu Martyrs,” Columbia University, *Journal of International Affairs*, 1998.
- 16 N. De Mel, *Beyond the Gaze: The Female Suicide Bomber, Gender, Sexuality and Militarism in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Vijitha Yappa Publications, 2002).
- 17 Clara Beyler, “Messengers of Death: Female Suicide Bombers” (Herzliya: ICT, 2003).
- 18 Arjuna Gunawardena, *Black Tigers: LTTE Suicide Terrorism – the Sri Lankan Experience*, MSc dissertation, University of Leicester, UK, 2003.
- 19 Laura Ann Trombley, “Female Suicide Bombers: The Newest Trend in Terrorism,” May 8, 2002, <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefe/joe/tromb1.html>.
- 20 Yoram Schweitzer, “A Fundamental Change in Tactics,” *Washington Post*, October 19, 2003.
- 21 Jain Commission Report on the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.
- 22 W. A. Knight and T. Narozhna, “Black Widow Terrorists are a Puzzling Breed,” *Express News*, 2004, <http://expressnews.ualberta.ca/article.cfm?id=6052>.
- 23 J. Stern, “When Bombers are Women,” *Washington Post*, December 18, 2003.
- 24 N. Ayers, “Choosing to Die: Repression and the Adoption of Suicide Tactics,” PS311C IR Workshop (Fearon/Goldstein), Stanford University, March 5, 2006.
- 25 LTTE political leader at a ceremony commemorating Black Tiger Day on July 5, 2006.
- 26 Posthumously promoted to Lt. Gen.
- 27 Iqbal Athas, “Situation Report,” *Sunday Times*, Wijeya Newspapers Ltd, Colombo, July 22, 2006.
- 28 This is the case even though an all-out war may well be what the LTTE wishes to avoid at this juncture, during which the LTTE has made use of the ceasefire agreement (CFA) to create a situation of a state-in-the-making. An all-out war would result in both the loss of infrastructure built during the CFA and a negative international impact. Use of suicide terrorism, however, as well as claymore mines/landmines in government controlled areas can be a means of exerting pressure on the government and compelling the redeployment of additional troops away from the defense lines in a general defensive posture vs. an offensive posture, even setting the stage for a UDI, which may be what Sri Lanka will face next.

# **Criminological Perspectives on Female Suicide Terrorism**

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**Maria Alvanou**

Following the terrorist strikes that shook the United States on September 11, 2001, the phenomenon of suicide attacks became a topic of particular interest to terrorism analysts, psychologists, government officials, and much of the general public in various regions of the world. Special attention has turned to the use of women as suicide attackers, as it appears to be a broadening trend among Chechen and Palestinian groups.<sup>1</sup>

Yet despite the media sensation that it created, the phenomenon of female suicide terror has not earned widespread attention in the academic literature, and to date only a handful of scholarly articles have been published on the subject. Most studies are oriented towards the issue of suicide terrorism in general and then concern themselves with particular interpretations that touch on religious, cultural, or psychological dimensions. In addition, the majority of academic approaches are derived from theories of collective violence in the field of political science, with others emerging from the disciplines of psychology, international relations, religion, and economics. Among this plethora of studies, a further methodological question can be put forward: What has criminology to offer in the study of terrorism? And beyond that, what about female suicide bombers is worth examining?

## **Criminology and the Study of Suicide Terrorism**

Perhaps predictably, the fields of study that until now have dealt with terrorism have been largely confined to their own theoretical perspectives: political scientists focus particularly on the relationship between terrorism and the state, policy programs, and political institutions; international studies scholars investigate the subject in terms of the complicated interfaces between nations and other localities; and psychologists try to explain the inner world, thinking, and motivation of terrorism's physical

actor. Moreover, suicide missions, like terrorism in general, have been discussed and analyzed as a mode of warfare, a method of struggle, a strategy of insurgency, and a form of political protest, with all these ever challenged by the same question of “terrorism or freedom fighting,” accompanied by the ongoing problem of what constitutes terrorism or what defines its absence.<sup>2</sup>

The semantic and political controversies aside, there is no question that the threat or use of murder, injury, or destruction are all crimes, committed to coerce the government or other target groups into conceding to the demands of the said terrorist(s). In particular, the suicide attack is a bloody and intensely violent act of homicide, often resulting in multiple fatalities and numerous injuries. Thus more than the source of tremendous horror, it is above all a crime. Yet few scholars<sup>3</sup> have taken the issue of suicide terrorism to the fore of the criminological debate and they are indeed a minority within criminology’s limited contribution to the study of the general phenomenon of terrorism.<sup>4</sup> This is surprising because the *raison d’être* of criminology is to address criminal behavior; breaking of laws has long been the central concern of criminology, and a suicide mission – even if not labeled as terrorism – is closely related to legal transgression.

Criminologists relate to the notion of a crime with reference to its legal context, that is, as a violation of a law, and eschew the non-technical, frequent usage of “crime” to mean any evil act. Here the advantage of criminology over other disciplines is that the controversial ethical dimension in terrorism’s ideological construction has little meaning whatsoever. A suicide attack as a method of intentional killing of others is legitimately researched in depth as homicide, overcoming arguments of a “just cause.” While terrorist organizations usually describe themselves as national liberation movements, fighters against social, economic, or religious oppression or a combination of these,<sup>5</sup> the validity of their argument has little to do with their violent act.<sup>6</sup> Some groups undoubtedly do fight for self-determination or national liberation, but not all resort to terrorism. Some groups are both terrorist and liberationist; some are either and some are neither. But what is important is whether their missions violate international law or the law of the territory where they operate and concentrate their activities. In such a case, regardless of any potential virtue or justification, they can be more than legitimately considered the object of criminological research.

Suicide bombings, apart from the particular national homicide law they violate (depending on where the attacks occur), also fall into the category of crimes against humanity. Although the definition of this term might differ slightly from treaty to treaty, all treaties condemn the deliberate, widespread, or systematic killing of

civilians by an organization or government.<sup>7</sup> Unlike war crimes, crimes against humanity may be committed in times of peace or in periods of unrest that do not rise to the level of an armed conflict.<sup>8</sup> The most recent definition of crimes against humanity is contained in the Rome Statute of the ICQ, which entered into force on July 1, 2002. The statute defines crimes against humanity as the “participation in and knowledge of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population,” and “the multiple commission of [such] acts...against any civilian population, pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy to commit such attack.” The statute’s introduction defines “policy to commit such attack” to mean that the state or organization actively promoted or encouraged such attacks against a civilian population. The elements of the “crime against humanity of murder” require that: (1) “the perpetrator killed one or more persons” (2) “the conduct was committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population” and (3) “the perpetrator knew that the conduct was part of, or intended the conduct to be part of, a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population.”<sup>9</sup>

The suicide mission, moreover, from a criminal law perspective, is a murder act with a particular *mens rea*: the willingness to kill combined with the willingness to die,<sup>10</sup> with the latter expressed as the specific operational method to accomplish the first objective. We are actually dealing with a combined violent act, one of special characteristics. This is why the component element “suicide” may be misleading, because the main objective of the mission is not suicide but mass homicide, albeit carried out by means of self-destruction designed to inflict lethal harm on others.<sup>11</sup> The suicide terrorist actually becomes a human time bomb in order to hurt others and clearly needs to be distinguished from an ordinary person who entertains suicidal tendencies.<sup>12</sup> For the suicide bomber, it is not the determination to kill him or herself, but rather the determination to kill the enemy that is the driving force.<sup>13</sup>

## Female Suicide Terrorism

But what is so special and particular about women suicide bombers? Why should any research on suicide terrorism be focused on them? Apart from women’s seeming innocence and assumed aversion to violence – which are the key reasons terrorist groups use them in order to bypass security measures and easily avoid detection – from an operational point of view there doesn’t seem to be any other difference between female and male perpetrators. Irrespective of the perpetrator’s gender, the definition of a suicide attack remains the same: an “operational method in which the very act of the attack is dependent upon the death of the perpetrator. The terrorist is

fully aware that if she/he does not kill her/himself, the planned attack will not be implemented."<sup>14</sup>

Still, there is an additional "bonus" of female suicide terrorism: many organizations deliberately recruit women for strategic purposes, because female suicide bombers receive even more media attention than their male equivalents. Women who kill or threaten to kill are "hot news." It is a reaction that knows "no state or religious boundaries."<sup>15</sup> Their media shock value is a lot higher than that of men, and as research has shown, "public perceptions of the level of terrorism in the world appear to be determined not by the level of violence, but rather by the quality of the incidents, the location, and the degree of media coverage."<sup>16</sup> While generally with suicide attacks the terrorists put together an operational "package that is so spectacular, so violent, so compelling, that the [media,] acting as executives, supplying the cameras and the audience, cannot refuse the offer,"<sup>17</sup> making the suicide bomber the ultimate victim of the act while claiming moral high ground,<sup>18</sup> there is an additional value when the perpetrator is a woman. People around the world try to comprehend the motivations of such an act, and the underlying message is that the present environment these women lived in must have been so humiliating that death is preferable to life under such conditions,<sup>19</sup> even for those creatures that are programmed by nature to breed and sustain life. The fact that the attacker was willing to cast her own life with those of her victims permits a sympathetic audience to balance out and "soften" the crime.<sup>20</sup> This position does indeed earn sympathy:<sup>21</sup> suddenly the media finds superficial similarities between perpetrator and victim, implying some sort of commonality.<sup>22</sup> If "terrorism is theatre,"<sup>23</sup> then the play particularly hits the box office when women are starring.

But criminology has more reasons to deal with women suicide terrorists than their great echo effect in the media. Criminology is an applied discipline that searches for the causes of crime in order to eradicate the problem. What is unique to it and indeed is its defining characteristic is the central question about the causes of crime and the ultimate focus on the offender, rather than on mechanisms of discipline and regulation that go beyond the limits of the field of crime. The actor, the offender, the criminal is the key in interpreting, analyzing, and ideally combating the crime. Gender and its social implications are an important factor of every person's activity and as a result, also of the illegal actions attributed to a deviant person.

It is an established fact that males and females differ biologically and undergo diverse and different sociological influences too, such as gender-specific role playing that appears to be rooted within most families and societies. Though

quite provocative, the idea that “the enemy is within every woman, but is not her reproductive biology, rather it is the habit regarding it into which she has been led by centuries of male domination”<sup>24</sup> is not that distant from reality.<sup>25</sup> The unequal position of women in society due to social oppression and economic dependency on men and the state, especially in the environments where female suicide terrorism occurs, has to be examined. Feminist perspectives over the past thirty years have not only added some new topics under the criminological umbrella; they have challenged the theories, concepts, methods, and assumptions of most of the people already involved in the study of crime. Most theories of criminality have been developed from male subjects and validated on male subjects. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this methodology, the problem is that these theories have been extended generally to include all criminals, defendants, and prisoners. It was assumed that the theories would apply to women; yet most do not appear to do so because they do not consider the special circumstances of female reality. Social and economic conditions, environmental influences, cultural traditions, and physiological factors must all be taken into account when dealing with female criminality and female suicide terrorism.

The problem of suicide “martyrs” is particularly difficult to understand. The perpetrators are willing not merely to risk their lives, but to commit themselves to die for their cause. It is this apparent readiness to sacrifice oneself that makes the threat of suicide terrorism so large and so incomprehensible, as most of us cannot imagine ourselves committing any such act. Suicide bombings seem to epitomize the violence of irrationality. They are a form of an extraordinary self-immolation, an act that operates against the most basic of all human instincts, self-preservation. When women are involved, the issue becomes even more perplexing, especially when these women were brought up in a cultural environment that dictates their roles as mothers and submissive creatures. We are more used to mad, bad, ruthless, male terrorists, though their actions as suicide bombers defy our understanding; on the other hand, women exploding themselves totally destroy their traditional gender roles of nurturing caregivers.

There is a major question about the interpretation of female criminality, which doesn't extend much beyond the early theories of the experts in delinquency.<sup>26</sup> In fact, we still tend to attribute female deviant behavior to particular biological or psychological traits and ignore interactioning and sociological parameters. A common image of the deviant woman as “non-woman” – masculine or unfeminine – is the most popular when discussing the feminine role in terrorism and political

deviance. The female terrorist, engaging in illegal activity, traditionally considered the domain of men, purportedly engages in this activity because she is in essence masculine and thus often portrayed as unisexed, unattractive, and unnatural. This is especially so when she does not engage in sidekick activity, but contributes actively and essentially to the terrorist group operations.<sup>27</sup> Female terrorists have traditionally been described as cruel, crueler in fact than their male comrades.<sup>28</sup> Even today, women are generally measured as deviant according to attitudes that derive largely from classical Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe, be they of pagan mythology or Judeo-Christian theology.<sup>29</sup> The mega-proportioned violence of suicide attacks is a further challenge to break stereotypes and discover how given their boundaries, role, and function in society women can indeed commit the same criminal acts as men, even the most hideous ones.

Just as women's roles in societies have customarily been distinguished from men's roles,<sup>30</sup> so too their roles in warring have also been clearly delineated with unmistakably demarcated boundaries. Society, through its body of rules and its numerous institutions, has conventionally dictated the female roles within the boundaries of militancy. Though nationalist movements invite women to participate, "on the other hand they reaffirm the boundaries of culturally acceptable feminine conduct and exert pressure on women to articulate their gender interests within the terms of reference set by nationalist discourse."<sup>31</sup> Assisting in subordinate roles has always been welcomed and encouraged, but actually active fighting in the war has not. Thus women have had to demand to be integrated in all aspects of war, including frontline fighting.<sup>32</sup> In the context of wars and conflicts, women have tended to be classified within the single category "women and children," as the vulnerable victims who suffer under violence with no means of defense. Yet women are not necessarily vulnerable and certainly have needs, experiences, and roles in war that differ from those of children.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, women have been and are actively engaged in many armed conflicts around the world, playing their own part in wars throughout history.<sup>34</sup>

So the question remains, what leads women to support and join violent organizations and commit atrocious acts? Paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir, women suicide bombers are not born; they are made. Suicide terrorism is a social fact in the Durkheimian sense, and it ought to "be explained not as an individual psychological aberration but as the product of specific social conditions."<sup>35</sup> Rather than trying to figure out what kind of woman becomes a suicide bomber, it may be more useful to consider the factors that attract these people to this horror-spreading activity.

One can examine the processes by which a woman might be encouraged to fulfill a specific role. It is furthermore essential to link the female presence in terrorist groups to social developments of particular interest to women in the societies where the terrorist groups recruit and operate. Some groups espouse ideologies that inhibit women from joining them while others do not,<sup>36</sup> and in some cases female suicide terrorism has not been welcomed by terrorist groups themselves.<sup>37</sup>

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict represents an opportunity and example to study female suicide terrorism in the context of an ongoing conflict and within the terms of a patriarchal society. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip launched a campaign of suicide attacks as part of their operational tactics since 1993 and especially after the start of the al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000. The volume of terrorism perpetrated against Israel during the first two years of this intifada was unprecedented in the country's history<sup>38</sup> and was a seismic shock to most observers. After January 2002 with the self-detonation of Wafa Idris,<sup>39</sup> Palestinian women have heightened their involvement in the conflict<sup>40</sup> by joining the ranks of men who use themselves as human bombs and commit acts of suicide bombing. In the framework of the second intifada, women have proven to be a valuable and precious weapon in the fight against Israel. It is no exaggeration that they have become critical components of the new Palestinian human precision bomb<sup>41</sup> that operates against the undeniable military supremacy of the Israelis. On the Palestinian streets suicide bombings carried out by women are deemed as a response weapon to the enemy's structured armed forces: "The Israelis have women in their army. We do not have F-16s, rockets or tanks. But these girls are our rockets. It's OK for our girls to fight the Jews."<sup>42</sup> Though not necessarily with the conscious goal of breaking down gender roles, the female suicide bombers have nonetheless found themselves challenging traditional cultural standards of Palestinian society.<sup>43</sup> Given the specific traits (social-cultural-religious) of Palestinian society and the intensity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the question is what drives the female involvement in suicide attacks. How is it that Palestinian women, brought up and living in a patriarchal society with strong and growing Islamic influence and predetermined careers as mothers and breeders and who are minimally represented in "common" criminality, engage in this type of violent and deadly activity?

## Conclusion

Aristotle argued over 2000 years ago that it was legitimate to resist tyranny, yet he provided no arguments as to which means were legitimate.<sup>44</sup> Until today, although

we still cannot agree in defining legally what activity can be characterized as “terrorism,” we can all repeat the famous words, “I can’t define it but I know when I see it.”<sup>45</sup> Most important, we all feel the need to explain it and finally combat it. Yet human bombs, this fashionable weapon of today’s terror campaigns, pose an extra difficulty, as they are perceived by many as most difficult to prevent and repel: how can someone actually stop and deter a person who is not afraid of giving up life? The appearance of women in this kind of murder activity has complicated the question, as their gender makes it quite difficult to detect let alone understand them, due to existing images and perceptions about the female role in society and crime.

Usually security services, policymakers, and analysts have little conceptual understanding of how the factors contributing to terrorism, as well as the various social parameters, actually affect the individual terrorist. Instead they seem to believe strongly that hard-line policies will prevent terrorism because terrorists want to avoid high costs. The prescriptions dictated by this approach are quite attractive, because they are conventional, compatible with the existing political doctrine, and relatively easy to implement. Few efforts have been made thus far to devise an analytical framework for understanding the processes and factors that underlie the development of the suicide bomber and the execution of suicide bombing attacks, and even fewer about the female actors. Yet to date the approach has contributed little in combating suicide terrorism, where the perpetrators clearly are oblivious to the physical cost of their actions.

If multiple factors are likely to underlie any one observation,<sup>46</sup> this undoubtedly applies to suicide terrorism, which is a complex phenomenon not caused by one single factor and not to be adequately explained by one overarching motivation. In order to understand it there is a need to appreciate the ethnic, religious, political, social, and economic context in which it takes place.<sup>47</sup> If perceived as a crime, then any factor that affects or concerns the perpetrator also has to be analyzed in order to break down the pattern of deviance and deter it adequately.

Gender is one of these crucial factors, so the female participation in suicide terrorism merits special research, since the cultural, social, and religious standards in the terrorism arenas put women in a very different position than that of men. They are “special” deviants, not because the operational method of their self-immolation differs from that of men, but because their womanhood plays a key role in the way the whole social environment influences them. It is the specific province of criminology, which involves studying the manifestations of crime and social control in relation to law as well as the conditions, processes, and implications at the societal level, that

contributes to identifying and analyzing female suicide attacks. Thus, criminology can offer valuable explanations to the formidable goals of counterterrorism, which in turn will be better able to try to combat or modify the special characteristics of this form of female criminal behavior.

## Notes

- 1 In the past groups such as the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers (LTTE) and the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) have also had their suicide missions carried out by female perpetrators. Actually, one of the most infamous terrorist attacks, the suicide operation in 1991 that killed Rajiv Gandhi in India, was staged by an LTTE woman. See Radika Coomaraswamy, "Women of the LTTE: The Tiger's and Women's Emancipation," *Frontline*, January 10, 1997, pp.61-64; Dexter Filkins, "Shri Lanka Women at War: Tamil Rebel Group is Now One-Third Female," *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), March 13, 2000; Adam Dolnik, "Die and Let Die: Exploring Links between Suicide Terrorism and Terrorist Use of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Weapons," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26 (2003): 24; and Yoram Schweitzer, "Suicide Terrorism: Development and Main Characteristics," in *ICT, Countering Suicide Terrorism*, pp. 82-83.
- 2 It is a known and over-discussed fact that there is no uniform definition of terrorism and no universal consensus about it. As a sample, see the US State Department definition, Title 22 of the U.S. Code, Chapter 38, Section 2656f (d): "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience"; the FBI definition: "unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives"; and the United Nations definition: "any act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, or to any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act," Article 2(b) of International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, May 5, 2004.
- 3 See Mathieu Deflem, ed., *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: Criminological Perspectives*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2004, which is one of the few published criminology works on this subject.
- 4 Although the research literature on terrorism has expanded dramatically since the 1970s, adequate work has not been done by criminologists or appeared in criminology journals.

- 5 Ariel Merari, "Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5, no. 4 (1993): 213-51, especially, p. 225.
- 6 Even Amnesty International unreservedly condemns direct attacks on civilians as well as indiscriminate attacks, whatever the cause for which the perpetrators are fighting and whatever justification they give for their actions. For example, see "Israel and the Occupied Territories and the Palestinian Authority: Without distinction: Attacks on Civilians by Palestinian Armed Groups," Amnesty International, July 2002, AI Index: MDE 02/003/2002.
- 7 One example of a definition is contained in article 18 of the Draft Code of crimes against the Peace and Security of Mankind, drafted by the expert members of the International Law Commission. Article 18 uses a definition of crimes against humanity based on the Nuremberg Charter, but also takes into account developments in international law since Nuremberg. It sets out two conditions that must be met for acts such as murder, enslavement, mutilation, and rape to qualify as crimes against humanity. The first was that the act be committed "in a systematic manner or on a large scale," meaning that it must have been committed as a result of a deliberate plan or policy, usually resulting in repeated acts. The second condition was that the acts be directed against multiple victims, either "as a result of the cumulative effect of a series of inhumane acts or the singular effect of an inhumane act of extraordinary magnitude." See Article 18 – Crimes Against Humanity in chapter II, "Draft Code of Crimes Against the Peace and Security of Mankind" in the International Law Commission Report, 1996 at <http://www.un.org/law/ilc/reports/1996/chap02.htm#doc3> (accessed September 3, 2002).
- 8 But those who commit crimes against humanity, like war crimes, are held individually criminally responsible for their actions. Actually, crimes against humanity give rise to universal jurisdiction, do not admit the defense of following superior orders, and they do not benefit from statutes of limitation. International jurisprudence and standard setting of the last ten years have consolidated the view that those responsible for crimes against humanity and other serious violations of human rights should not even be granted amnesty.
- 9 Article 7(1)(a), "Finalized draft text of the Elements of Crimes Adopted by the Preparatory Commission for the International Criminal Court," November 2, 2000, U.N. Document PCNICC/2000/1/Add.2.
- 10 Simultaneous or contiguous suicide and homicide has also occurred in the past in a military context, for example when some 5000 young Japanese pilots in all died as kamikaze in the last ten months of World War II; see Walter Laquer, "Reflections on Eradication of Terrorism," in Charles Kegley Jr., ed., *International Terrorism*, New York: St. Martins Press, 1990, p. 209, and Harvey Gordon, "The 'Suicide' Bomber: Is it a Psychiatric Phenomenon?" *Psychiatric Bulletin* 26 (2002): 285.

- 11 Indicative is the deliberate effort to maximize human suffering not only in the immediate explosion but also in the minutes, days, and even years following it. Planners of suicide attacks in Israel, for example, have often packed explosives with foreign objects. Long after the attack, victims can still have pieces of shrapnel, nails, bolts, screws, ball bearings, and other projectiles that were built into the bombs embedded in their bodies. Another recent innovation is the addition of chemicals such as rat poison, which is an anti-coagulant and makes it much more difficult for rescue workers to stem the bleeding from injured victims. Over time, suicide attacks that incorporate such elements can be psychologically more punishing, not only to the victims but to the population at large. On this subject, see Tracy Wilkinson, "The World Lives Forever Scarred After Suicide Bombings in Israel: Survivors Labor to Recover Physically and Mentally; Some Still Have Shrapnel in Their Bodies," *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 2002, p. A1.
- 12 On the "classic" characteristics of a suicidal individual, see Daniel S. and Neal M. Soss, "An Economic Theory of Suicide," *Journal of Political Economy* 82, no.1 (1974): 83-98.
- 13 See Raphael Israeli, "Islamikaze and their Significance," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 3 (1997): 104. This is why the term does not include self-inflicted deaths that occur without any violence directed outward, like hunger strikes or cult suicides; see Yoram Schweitzer, "Suicide Terrorism: Development and Main Characteristics," in *Countering Suicide Terrorism: An International Conference*, Herzliya, Israel: International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 2001, pp. 75-76. Even if suicides do act as a form of protest. politically motivated suicide behavior is by no means a new phenomenon; acts of self-killing have been used as a methodical demonstration of commitment and unyielding form of protest. For example, Stefan Lux shot himself on the floor of the League of Nations in 1936 to protest against England's failure to act against Germany; Buddhist monks set themselves on fire during the Vietnam War to protest against the regime of South Vietnam; the same tactic was used by Jan Palach and Jan Zajic in 1968 to protest against the Warsaw Pact troops invasion. See Hala Jaber, *Hizballah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 76; Uzi Arad, "Do Nations Commit Suicide? A Middle Eastern Perspective" in *Countering Suicide Terrorism*, p. 25; and Irwin Mansdorf, "The Psychological Framework of Suicide Terrorism," *Jerusalem Viewpoints* no 496, April 15, 2003, p. 3.
- 14 Boaz Ganor, "The First Iraqi Suicide Bombing. A Hint of Things to Come?" March 30, 2003; available from <http://www.ict.org.il/articles/articleDet.cfm?articleid=477>; accessed September 5, 2003.
- 15 Melanie Reid, "Myth that Women are the Most Deadly Killers of All," *Herald* (Glasgow), January 29, 2002, sec. A, p.14, database on-line; available from Lexis-Nexis; accessed September 5, 2003.
- 16 Yonah Alexander and John M. Gleason, eds., *Behavioural and Quantitative Perspectives on Terrorism* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981), p. 8.

- 17 J. Bowler Bell, quoted in Brigitte Nacos, *Terrorism and the Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 51.
- 18 Avishai Margalit, "The Suicide Bombers," *New York Review of Books* 50, no. 1, January 16 2003, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/15979#fnr1>.
- 19 Dolnik, "Die and Let Die," p. 21.
- 20 As Camus noted, "A life is paid for another life, and from these two sacrifices springs the promise of a value," in Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 169.
- 21 The "despair" element of suicide bombers is a basic reason for the sympathy of the public towards them. In this spirit Cherie Blair commented about Palestinian suicide terrorism in Israel: "As long as young people feel they have got no hope but to blow themselves up, you are never going to make progress," quoted in George Jones and Anton La Guardia, "Anger at Cherie Sympathy for Suicide Bombers," *Telegraph*, June 19, 2002.
- 22 Very indicative and enlightening on this argument is the Associated Press article by Celean Jacobson, "Mirror Images: Two Teenage Girls, Bomber and Victim," April 6, 2002, in which seventeen year old Ayat Ahras was compared to her Israeli female teenage victim.
- 23 Brian Michael Jenkins, "International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict," in David Carlton and Carlo Schaerf, eds., *International Terrorism and World Security* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), p. 16.
- 24 S. Edwards, *Women on Trial* (New Hampshire: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 91.
- 25 Loraine Gelsthorpe and Alison Morris, *Feminist Perspectives in Criminology* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990).
- 26 Luisella de Cataldo Neuburger and Tiziana Valentini, *Women and Terrorism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).
- 27 It is clear that some women played an important role in the terrorist groups that were active during the 1970s. Whether in the Symbionese Liberation Army and the Weather underground in the US, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in the Middle East, or the German Red Army Faction and the Italian Red Brigades, women have made headlines and attracted attention with their strong and active involvement in terrorism.
- 28 Notorious examples of this assumption have been the facts that Renata Chiari remained obdurately non-cooperative while her husband became a "super penitent" of the Walter Alasia column; Silveria Russo and Susanna Ronconi decided, against the opinion of the men, to form a female commando squad to strike a female prison guard in the Torino penitentiary; Mara Cagol against the opinion of her male comrades attempted to help her husband Renato Curcio escape from the Monferrato jail.
- 29 The dark ages and the witch hunt affected dramatically the feminine representation in crime and even in terrorism, since witchcraft was practically the only woman's crime for a long time. The "logical" relationship between being a woman and engaging in

witchcraft was quite direct: witches are women, hence all women are potential witches. This image of a witch remains a potent symbol, easily conjured up even subliminally as witnessed for example in the IRA's "Evil Sisters"; for more see de Cataldo Neuburger and Valentini, *Women and Terrorism*, pp. 32-33.

- 30 For example, during the first intifada, a discussion of women was conspicuously absent from the majority of the leaflets distributed by the Palestinians, since the uprising was articulated as a product of male agency. The leaflets were addressed to the "sons of Palestine," "cubs," and "soldiers of justice." The women were only spoken of as mothers; see T. Sherwell, "Palestinian Costume, the Intifada and the Gendering of Nationalist Discourse," *Journal of Gender Studies* 5, no.3 (1996): 301.
- 31 D. Kandiyoti, "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation," in P. Williams and L. Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory* (London: Harvester and Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 380.
- 32 Lucy Frazier, "Abandon Weeping for Weapons: Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers," [www.nyu.edu/classes/keefe/joe/frazier.html](http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefe/joe/frazier.html), August 6, 2002.
- 33 Although in many conflicts children are coerced into taking on adult roles.
- 34 For more, see Charlotte Lindsey, "Women and War – An overview, 30-09-2000," *International Review of the Red Cross*, no. 839, pp. 561-79. Actually, it was the Second World War that highlighted women's role primarily in reservist or support units (including work in munitions factories) in the German and British forces and, in the case of the Soviet Union, their direct participation in the fighting as members of all services and units "constituting 8% of the total armed forces"; see Françoise Krill, "The Protection of Women in International Humanitarian Law," *IRRC*, no. 249, November-December 1985, pp. 337-63. Since then, women have assumed a much greater role and join the armed forces more frequently, voluntarily and involuntarily, performing both support and combatant roles. To give a few examples, in the United States military, "overall, 14% of active duty personnel are women," and of the US forces who served in the 1991 Gulf War, 40,000 were women, see Greg Siegle, "Women Critical to Success of US All-Volunteer Force," *Jane's Defence Weekly* 31, no. 23, June 23, 1999. It is estimated that a fifth of the Eritrean armed forces are female; see David Hirst, "Ethiopia: Human Waves Fall as War Aims Unfold," *The Guardian*, May 18, 1999, and up to a third of the fighting forces of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) involved in the civil war in Sri Lanka are women; see Dexter Filkins, "Sri Lanka Women at War," *Herald Tribune*, March 13, 2000. The role of the female suicide bombers of the LTTE has also underscored the horrifying extent to which women are prepared to take action in that ongoing conflict. Ironically, much of their "success" in hitting targets can be attributed to the fact that as women they can often get closer to their objective – possibly precisely due to the common perception that they are more vulnerable and therefore less likely to carry out such attacks.

- 35 Ghassan Hage, "‘Comes a Time We Are All Enthusiasm’: Understanding Palestinian Suicide Bombers in Times of Exiphobia," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 69.
- 36 An indicative example even in "conventional" terrorism can be the Basque organization ETA, which deliberately discouraged female involvement because women's place "was at home" and they "talked too much, especially to priests." See Robert Clark, "Patterns in the Lives of ETA Members," paper prepared for delivery at the Annual Conference of Europeanists, Washington, DC, April 1987, p. 7.
- 37 The Palestinian case is one of interest in this subject, as there was a whole debate on whether women were or were not allowed to carry out suicide missions. Maria Alvanou, "Hijab of Blood: The Role of Islam in Female Palestinian Terrorism," in *ERCES on line Quarterly Review* 1, no.3, (2004), available at <http://www.erces.com/journal>.
- 38 This is not the first time that Palestinian armed groups used suicide bombings to target Israeli civilians, although the scale and intensity of the wave of attacks was unprecedented. Between September 1993 and the outbreak of the clashes between Palestinians and Israelis in late September 2000, Palestinian groups carried out fourteen suicide bombing attacks against Israeli civilians, mostly in 1996-97, killing more than 120 and wounding over 550. Suicide bombing attacks against Israeli civilians in late February and early March 1996 killed fifty-six and injured more than 150. Five attacks in 1997 killed twenty-nine and wounded more than 200. The last suicide bombing prior to the al-Aqsa intifada was an attack in November 1998 that wounded twenty-four. There were no Palestinian suicide bomb attacks against civilians in 1999 or 2000.
- 39 On February 9, 2002, the *New York Times* reported that an Israeli government investigation concluded that Wafa Idris was in fact a suicide bomber. The investigation had been ordered since circumstances surrounding the attack were initially unclear, especially the question of whether Idris had attempted to plant a bomb and escape, or whether she had intended to die in the attack. For more on this issue, see James Bennet, "Israelis Declare Arab Woman was in Fact a Suicide Bomber," *New York Times*, February 9, 2002 (internet edition). Before that, in August 2001, a Palestinian woman subsequently classified as a would-be suicide bomber was caught while attempting to carry a bomb into Tel Aviv's central bus station; see Douglas Davis, "Report: Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers in Training," *Jerusalem Post On-line News*, August 6, 2001. Previously, Ataf Alian was apparently the first woman who (in 1987) tried to commit a suicide bombing in Jerusalem, according to an article of Zvi Bareil, "Women's Work," *Haaretz*, January 23, 2004, p. B4.
- 40 Yet the story about female involvement in the general framework of Palestinian fighting comes from further back, even if with different forms and modalities. On August 29, 1968, Leila Khaled, a young PFLP activist, participated in the hijacking of the Rome-Athens flight. Arrested and then released in exchange with other prisoners, she lives in Damascus and is the mother of two children. In 1978, nineteen year old Dalal al-Mughrabi, close to the Fatah organization, was head of a group of eleven attackers (with

a second woman in the group) that hijacked an Israeli bus. The attack ended up with 39 dead and 72 wounded. Elsewhere in the Middle East, there is also a precedent for the use of female suicide bombers. On March 10, 1985, eighteen year old Sumayah Sa'ad drove a car loaded with dynamite into an Israeli military position in southern Lebanon, killing twelve Israeli soldiers and wounding fourteen others. Roughly two weeks later, on March 25, seventeen year old San'ah Muheidli drove a TNT-laden car into an IDF convoy, killing two soldiers and wounding two more. The two women were posthumously awarded the honouring title of "Brides of Blood" (*Arous ad-Damm*). For more, see Luca Ricolfi, Paolo Campana, "Suicide Missions in the Palestinian Area: A New Database," and Amir Taheri, *Holy Terror: Inside the World of Islamic Terrorism* (Bethesda, MD: Adler & Adler, 1987), pp. 126-29.

- 41 As one Palestinian trainer is quoted to have boastfully described them in Hala Jaber, "The Avengers," *Sunday Times* (London), December 7, 2003, sec. Features, p. 1, database on-line; available from Lexis- Nexis; accessed January 15, 2004.
- 42 A Palestinian teacher's opinion quoted in "Why Women Turn To Suicide Bombings," by Kevin Toolis, *The Observer*, October 12, 2003.
- 43 Frazier, "Abandon Weeping for Weapons: Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers."
- 44 Aristotle, *Politics*.
- 45 Borrowing Justice's Potter Stewart's famous words: "I shall not today attempt to further define [pornography]...but I know it when I see it," in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, June 22, 1964.
- 46 Charles Ragin argues that most causal relationships are governed by equifinality rather than homogeneity: "Typically, there are several combinations of conditions that may produce the same emergent phenomenon," *The Comparative Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
- 47 John Horgan and Max Taylor, "The Making of a Terrorist," *Jane's Intelligence Review* 13, no. 12 (2001): 16.



## **List of Contributors**

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Khapta Akhmedova, Ph.D. – Professor of Psychology, Chechen State University, Russia, and Coordinator of the Psychosocial Rehabilitation Program of Medecins Du Monde

Maria Alvanou, Ph.D. – defense lawyer, Hellenic Court of Appeals, doctorate in criminology, University of Trento

Arjuna Gunawardena – Researcher on suicide terrorism with expertise on Sri Lankan terrorism

Avi Issacharoff – Arab Affairs Correspondent, *Haaretz*

Yoram Schweitzer – Senior Research Associate, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D. – Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Georgetown University Medical Center and Psychological Consultant for Advances in Health

Mira Tzoreff, Ph.D. – Department of Middle Eastern History, Tel Aviv University, and Arab Literature Department, Beit Berl College

Rivka Yadlin, Ph.D. – Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies and The Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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