

Death Becomes Her: The Changing Nature of Women's Role in Terror

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On November 9, 2005, Muriel Degauque, a Belgian convert to Islam, blew herself up in Iraq. The very same day, Sajida Atrous al-Rishawi, another woman, tried to blow herself up a hotel wedding reception in Amman but her improvised explosive device (IED) failed to detonate and Jordanian police apprehended her instead. So far, over forty women in Iraq have attacked US troops or Iraqis using suicide bombs.¹ They have killed hundreds of men, women and children and their acts have maimed, blinded or crippled for life thousands more.

¹ There have been 32 women who succeeded or attempted suicide attacks in 2008 compared to 8 in 2007.

Terrorism has long been a predominantly male occupation. One of the most disturbing developments in terrorism today, relates to what seems to be an increasing involvement of women in terrorism. In the 1970s and 1980s, many women played prominent roles in Latin American and European terrorist networks. In some cases, women constituted as much as one-third of the organization—as was the case of Germany’s Red Army Faction and Second of June Movement. Virtually all of Germany’s “Red Zora” movement comprised women, and at all levels. These exceptions aside, women have tended to play a peripheral role in terrorist violence and provided support to male fighters. Recent developments reveal a disturbing trend. Women have started to migrate from supportive roles to more active, operational roles. Between 1985 and 2008, female suicide bombers committed over 230 attacks (representing about a quarter of the total). The percentage since 2002 in some regions exceeds as much as 50% of successful suicide terror operatives in conflicts like Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Chechnya.

The upsurge in female suicide bombers is not limited to one kind of group. This pattern has repeated itself across not only secular and nationalist organizations but also religious movements. While Islamist terror networks initially resisted the use of women, refusing to allow them to become martyrs, and turning them away when they tried to volunteer, this has forever changed. Even the most traditional of the Sunni Islamists, Al Qae-

da in Iraq (AQI), are increasingly using women to deadly effect.²

Forty years of research on terrorism has revealed very little about women's involvement in terrorism. Thus far, our understanding of women and terrorism has escaped systematic analysis. The majority of books about women and terror portray women as the victims,³ only a small handful of books have examined women's roles as the perpetrators of violence. What has been published falls into one of two categories, either the research is of poor quality or it is based on spurious journalistic accounts with a veneer of academic integrity. Because most books on the subject of women and terror rely so heavily on secondary sources and especially media reports, the books tend to suffer from the classic problem of perpetuating the stereotype that frame women as pawns or victims. The roles women actually play are never analyzed with any seriousness. After an attack by a female operative terrorism experts, psychologists, and political analysts frequently engage in developing a so-called "psy-

2 Mia Bloom, "Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend.", *Deadalus*, Winter 2007.

3 Robin Kirk, *Untold Terror: Violence against Women in Peru's Armed Conflict*, NY, Human Rights Watch, 2002; Ammu Joseph, *Terror and Counter Terror: Women Speak Out*, London, Zed Books, 2003; Betsey Reed, *Nothing Sacred: Women Respond to Religious Fundamentalism and Terror*, Nation Books, 2002; Anne Cubilie, *Women Witnessing Terror: Testimony and the Cultural Politics of Human Rights*, NY, Fordham University Press, 2005.

chological autopsy,” examining where the perpetrator grew up, where she went to school, and what went wrong to make her turn to violence. A common assumption is that she must be depressed, crazy, suicidal, or psychopathic, and, overwhelmingly, that it must have been a man that made her do it. This denies any agency for the women and denudes her motivations of any political content. Margaret Gonzalez-Perez’s, *Women and Terrorism: Female Activity in Domestic and International Terror Groups* stands out as illustrative of research available on the subject. The book purports to provide an exhaustive look at the role of women in both domestic and international terrorist groups yet is purely anecdotal. The problems of gross and faulty generalizations have been exacerbated by journalistic accounts that misrepresented findings to conform to these stereotypes.⁴ These do little to counter the simplistic depiction of women as “pawns” or “victims.”⁵ In *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* Barbara Victor described the “fatal cocktail” which led four Palestinian women to become suicide bombers. Rumors of men se-

4 For example Anat Berko, *The Path to Paradise*, New York, Praeger, 2007; Yoram Schweitzer, *Female Suicide Bombers for God*, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies; and Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*, 2003, have alleged that Palestinian female suicide bombers were morally or physically defective in some way; follow up interviews conducted by Dr. Anne Speckhard in 2006 have questioned the authenticity of these findings.

5 *Ibid.*

ducing women into participation in violence through sexual misconduct, requiring a subsequent “act of martyrdom” was the only way to purify the family name and save face. In studies based on the interviews of the families and friends of dead bombers, a major difficulty is that their findings represent an inference made from interviews of those *other than* the bombers themselves. Finally, published work based on the “Last Will and Testament” videos of dead bombers is said to provide an insiders view and understanding of motivation and intentions.⁶ Again, the problem is that in conducting research by watching these last will and testament videos by suicide bombers, one cannot disaggregate the motivations or purposes of the individual. The videos in question are interesting from an organizational perspective: however, they are scripted, carefully choreographed statements constructed to serve and enhance the image of the terrorist movement. The individual terrorist does nothing except to read a prepared statement. Attempting to draw out lessons about personal motivation from them is problematic to say the least. To quote Marc Sageman:

In the terrorism world, the lack of solid ethnographic work is compounded by the self-promotion of an army of self appointed

6 Anne Marie Oliver and Paul Steinberg, *The Road To Martyr's Square: A Journey into the World of Suicide Bombers*, Oxford University Press, 2006; see also Arie Kruglanski, X. Chen, M. Dechesne, S. Fishman, and E. Orehek, “Fully Committed: Suicide Bombers’ Motivation and the Quest for Personal Significance,” *Political Psychology*, v. 30, n. 3, 2009.

experts, who rely exclusively on Internet propaganda from terrorists. This is a bit like studying the nature of the Nazi state through its published and broadcast propaganda.⁷

According to psychologist Colin Wastell: “We are absolutely in need of more research that engages with the phenomenon, with the problem as it really exists. Not as we would characterize it, or caricature it.”⁸ Likewise, for Jeff Victoroff, psychological research on terrorism to date remains “largely characterized by theoretical speculation based on subjective interpretation of anecdotal observations.”⁹ Despite much of the existing work on the subject of the psychology of terrorism and understanding motivation, years of research finds psychopathology and personality disorder no more likely among women terrorists than among non-terrorists from the same communities.

Researchers rarely examine the conditions that influence female political violence beyond simplistic motivational concerns that center on their role as having some sexual function (for the gratification of male terrorists) or superficial gender stereotypes. With the increasing use of

7 Marc Sagemen, “A Review of: “Michael Kenney. From Pablo to Osama,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, v. 19, n. 4, p. 623-4, 2007.

8 Lindy Kerin, “Understanding Terrorism: the Psychology of Suicide Bombers,” *The World Today*, 14 September 2006.

9 Jeff Victoroff, “The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, v. 49, n. 3, p. 3-42, 2005.

female operatives (as suicide bombers and as front-line fighters) by secular and religious groups, innovative terrorist organizations are succeeding is exploiting Western gender stereotypes to their advantage. Female violence, typically seen as an aberrant and unnatural occurrence, becomes a way in which women might contribute to the good of the nation. Female terrorists are deadlier (they kill on average four times more people than their male counterparts), partly because they can penetrate targets more successfully, and are not subjected to the same intensity of scrutiny, have greater propaganda value, and create a “win-win” strategy for the terrorist organizations that employ them. The value of understanding what motivates women and what roles they play inside the terrorist organizations are crucial to understanding how to combat the lures of violent mobilization.

In order to better understand all of these issues, we need to take a serious look at women’s involvement in political violence and show how women’s roles and motivations have changed over time since the late 1950s when women first emerged as front line activists. Women’s roles have changed within the organizational structures of terrorist movements and women have migrated from support roles to more violent activism.

According to Galvin, “Some women are recruited into terrorist organizations by boyfriends. A significant feature that may characterize the involvement of the female terrorist is the “male or female lover/female accomplice

(...) scenario.”¹⁰ There is an accompanying assumption that women are incapable of consciously choosing terrorism—“it must have been a man that made her do it” is the common reaction. Rumors abound of men seducing women into committing violence through sexual misconduct, requiring a subsequent “act of martyrdom” as the only way to salvage the family name and save face.

While the media often portrays terrorist women as merely victims or pawns of men without any political motivation of their own the reality is far more complex. And, although we no longer believe that men force women into terrorism, the men in these women’s lives do play a crucial role in mobilizing them and providing the entry into the organization.

Noor Huda Ismail has argued that strategic marriages among Jihadis in the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) organization in Indonesia have cemented the ties between the groups and created strong bonds of kinship among disparate cells.¹¹ In these cases, the women are crucial in linking together the JI network and keeping the men firm in their commitment to Jihad. However, even with women’s ter-

10 Deborah M. Galvin, “The Female Terrorist: A Socio-Psychological Perspective,” *Behavioral Science and the Law*, n. 1, p. 19-32, 1983.

11 Noor Huda Ismail, “The Role of Kinship in Indonesia’s Jemaah Islamiyah,” *Terrorism Monitor*, v. 4, n. 11, June 2, 2006, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=791.

rorist linkages through men, it is wrong to assume that they have no political motives of their own.

Following from the women's personal accounts, in some cases, the women might be fierce warriors, whereas in other cases they might be no more than "shells" for the bombs they carry because they have been manipulated. In discussions with the women themselves they certainly think they have been inspired by ideology and commitment to the cause.¹² In fact, from the perspective of women who engage in terrorism, their involvement becomes a way to contribute to the "good of the nation." In several cases, women take great pains to emphasize their personal agency in getting involved. In the case of al-Rishawi, several of her brothers had been killed in Iraq fighting in the insurgency against Coalition troops. She subsequently volunteered for the mission in Jordan after her marriage of a few days provided a plausible cover.

Women involved in terrorist violence tend to be demonized more than male terrorists. One former bomber told me that the enemy was so angry that women were involved in the organization that they would humiliate the women more than their male counterparts just to teach them a lesson.¹³ After all, perpetrating acts that cause wanton destruction, death and disruption seem incompatible with the traditional stereotypes of what is ex-

12 Interviews with former female bombers, Belfast, Northern Ireland, August 2009.

13 *Ibid.*

pected of women—nurturing, caring figures that provide stability, reassurance against a backdrop of conflict that for the most part, involves, and stems from problems between, men. For female terrorists a common assumption is that they must be even *more* depressed, *crazier*, *more* suicidal, or *more* psychopathic than their male counterparts.

This runs contrary to Eileen McDonald's view that women revolutionaries have stronger characters, more power, more energy and are far more pragmatic than their male counterparts.¹⁴ Rather than create the disincentives to staying involved, the gender specific treatment that women receive by police, the military or by counter terrorism officials has often made them all the more steadfast in their commitment to the cause.

In essence, women's motivations run the spectrum from political reasons to specific personal experiences. According to some of the research, women might be motivated by reasons that might be more "personal" than political which can be summarized as the four R's: Revenge, Redemption, Respect and Relationship.¹⁵ These include:

- the loss of a loved one (usually the male in their life, their husband, father, or brother) and thus the desire for revenge;

14 Eileen McDonald, *Shoot the Women First*, NY, Random House, 1992.

15 Farhana Ali, "Muslim Female Fighters: An Emerging Trend," *Terrorism Monitor*, v. 3, n. 21, 2005.

- a need to reinvent themselves because of alleged or real (sexual) misconduct¹⁶ or defect (e.g. the inability to conceive children or be considered unmarriageable)¹⁷ and thus the need for redemption;
- an altruistic desire to improve the status of women in their society¹⁸ and prove that they are just as dedicated as the men to the cause thus the quest for respect;
- being the sisters, daughters, or wives of well-known insurgents¹⁹ thus a relationship to a known Jihadi.

Although one researcher's (Schweitzer) conclusions are drawn exclusively from Palestinian bombers in Israeli jails, his findings do not readily apply to radicalized women elsewhere. In South and South East Asia or even other parts of the Middle East, other stories and accounts emerge, with women having been mobilized for a variety of complex personal and political reasons and have chosen these paths to violence.

Although one can argue that the male bombers might also be personally motivated, they tend to phrase their motivation as political. For example, many male Palestinian bombers have discussed either their own humili-

16 Schweitzer, *op.cit.*, 2003.

17 Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: the Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, New York, Random House, 2005.

18 Farhana Ali, "Muslim Female Fighters: An Emerging Trend," *Terrorism Monitor*, v. 3, n. 21, 2005.

19 Noor Huda Ismail, "Married to a Jihadist" *Straits Times*, March 10, 2006, available at <http://noorhudaismail.blogspot.com/2006/03/married-to-jihadist.html>.

ating experiences at checkpoints or witnessing their father's humiliation as a child. This is a personal memory that helps transform the individual into a political being although Schweitzer would argue that the men are politicized and the women are emotional. We can assume that both men and women have complex motivations but might frame their understandings in different ways.

Ultimately regardless as the initial source of motivation, what we know for a fact is that women are now more essential to terrorist organizations than ever before. The "exploding womb" has replaced the "revolutionary womb" that produced and supported young extremists as women increasingly turn to suicide terrorism. The leaders of the terrorist movements make cost-benefit calculations to select tactics, targets, and the operatives that are the most effective. In fact, terrorist networks exploit gender stereotypes strategically, making women the ultimate *stealth weapon*. Partly to substitute the loss of male recruits, and partly to evade counter terrorist profiles, terrorist organizations are increasingly using women as front-line operatives. By using females, terrorist groups hope for the government or occupation forces' overreaction, a sure-fire way to elicit outrage, anger, and the mobilization of new recruits. Terrorist leaders expect that the female population will be targeted in gender specific ways and subjected to punitive actions helping them mobilize a whole new generation of men for the future.

According to US military sources, “Female suicide bombers have become a weapon of choice for al-Qaeda in Iraq because women are less likely to be searched at checkpoints and also often wear long, black, Islamic robes that conceal explosives.”²⁰

By using female agents the groups employ a win-win strategy. If the US and British occupation forces search women invasively at borders and checkpoints for weapons, PBIEDS, or contraband this will undoubtedly anger the local male population.

Their women’s honor and chastity are at risk and the negative reaction will undoubtedly turn even the civilian population against the international troops. Furthermore, searching women invasively at checkpoints often places them in jeopardy and militaries are prone to abuse their power. Elsewhere I have described how checkpoint searches in places like Sri Lanka and Turkey have led to women being violated by soldiers and subsequently funneled into the terrorist organizations.²¹ However, the reverse is equally true. If the women remain outside the parameters of checkpoint searches for fear of alienating the local population, they become the ultimate stealth weapons. Furthermore, any abuse of the women is like-

20 Lieutenant Commander David Russell, US Military, cited by Deborah Haynes, “Girl Suicide Bomber Hands herself into police, *Times Online*, August 25, 2008 at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article4606947.ece>.

21 Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: the Allure of Suicide Terror*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005.

ly to emerge as a mechanism for radicalization and mobilization of the local population into the terrorist movement and the increasing involvement of women in the organization.

There have been a handful of documented cases in Iraq of women being sexually abused, either by individual soldiers or at Abu Ghraib nevertheless the propaganda value of these crimes has encouraged Jihadi websites to discuss the violation of women's honor as a function of the occupation and to inspire outrage in the globalized Islamic World.

The Al Qaeda manual captured in Afghanistan in 2001 discusses the humiliation of Muslim women as a cornerstone of Western Imperialist policy to humiliate Muslims worldwide. The manual begins with a poem entitled "Pledge, O Sister" warning Muslim women that the infidel will rip off their clothes, shave their heads, and dishonor them. It pledges further to destroy a godless dog who even utters a bad word towards their sisters in Islam.²²

The attack in Iraq against Abeer al Janabi, a fourteen year-old girl raped and killed by the US coalition troops was exploited to mobilize opposition to the presence of American troops in Iraq. Every newspaper and television station in the Arab and Islamic world carried the ex-

22 Jerrold Post (ed.) *Military Studies in the Jihad Against the Tyrants: The Al Qaeda Training Manual*, Alabama, USAF Counter-Proliferation Center, August 2004, p. 15.

PLICIT and detailed descriptions of the young girl's attack, rape, murder and the subsequent cover up.²³ Jihadi websites described how the Occupiers' vileness should inspire Muslims to rise up and join the Jihad against the nonbelievers.

They violate the honor of Muslims in their houses and raping them and then following up their horrible crime by burning the bodies to conceal it from the people as of the crimes of the oppressors, which the Glorious Qur'an told us about, materialized today with the actions of the occupiers and their henchmen... the more the enemy persists in its tyranny, the more we persist in continuing on the road of Jihad, which is our way of raising injustice from all Muslims... and destroying the signs of infidelity and disbelief.²⁴

Jaysh Al Mujahidin claimed that it had downed an Apache helicopter in retaliation for Abeer's rape.²⁵ Another insurgent group in Iraq named the rockets it used to attack US positions after the little girl. According to a report by Al Jazeera, the insurgent group named "Iraq's Islamic Army" (*al Jaish al Islami f'il Iraq*) claimed that

23 Al Baghdadiyah, Baghdad Satellite Channel, and Raidayn reported on Green's attack extensively. Al Mahmudiyah, Al Furat, Al Sharqiyah, and Al Diyar carried more factual reports with comments by Iraqi politicians.

24 Posting by "Abu Hanifah" to the Islamic Renewal Organization website, www.tajdeed.org.uk/forums, a website of the Saudi dissident group lead by Muhammed al Ma'asari based in the UK. The statement was issued by the Media Office of the Mujahideen Army in Iraq.

25 Al Jazeera Satellite Channel, July 4, 2006 (1412 GMT).

it was producing surface to air missiles named after Abeer.²⁶

Women now provide both the symbols of Jihad and its actual operatives. The female suicide bomber has now become the ultimate tool of psychological warfare—nobody knows when or where they will strike next, and there is heightened anxiety aroused by the prospect of female suicide bombers with more and more women exploding around the world. The female bombers tend to be more successful at reaching their targets and have higher kill rates than men. Women operatives also garner significantly more media attention than their male counterparts (at a rate of eight to one) and their participation may actually shame the men in their society into action instead of letting women “do their job.”²⁷ Given the increasing prevalence of women on the terrorist “frontline,” it remains curious that few women reach the echelons of leadership in contrast to the terrorist organizations in the 1970s (e.g. the Baader Meinhof Group in which both Astrid Proll and Ulrike Meinhof held crucial leadership roles). According to Clara Beyler,

26 The Islamic Army in Iraq, “Good News: Abeer Surface to Surface Rockets Manufacturing,” Friday, 21 September 2007, website of the Islamic Army of Iraq: http://iaisiteeng.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=58&Itemid=36 see also Al Jazeera Report, November 2006.

27 Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: the Allure of Suicide Terror*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005.

Women are rarely involved in the higher echelons of the decision-making process of these groups. Women may volunteer, or might be coerced to conduct a murderous strike, but the woman's role is ultimately dictated by the patriarchal hierarchy that rules Palestinian society and its terrorist groups.²⁸

Even in the terrorist groups where women comprise 30-60 percent of the bombers there are rarely female leaders. The reasons for this remain obscure and unclear at best but certainly show that until such time as women's lives are valued as much as their deaths, women's participation in violence does not create more opportunities for women of that society. Ultimately we will continue to see women terrorists as long as the terrorist organizations find them useful operatives. Women are increasingly scrutinized and checked—by other women—known as the “Daughters of Iraq.” As a result of the changes within the security environment terrorist groups have turned to two additional types of front-line activists, young children and people who are coerced into becoming bombers or who do not even know they have “volunteered.” In January 2006 a truck bomb killed 21 civilians in Kandahar. The driver had been duped. According to military analysts, the proxy bomb was becoming a trend in places where the Taliban had difficulties recruiting:

The drivers are often forced to transport the bombs after their families have been held hostage. They are deceived into think-

28 Clara Beyler, “Using Palestinian Women as Bombs,” *New York Sun*, November 15, 2006.

ing they simply have to park the vehicle and leave it to detonate but, instead, the bomb is detonated by remote control by bombers following in another car.²⁹

We will see new kinds of operatives emerge as terrorists continuously adapt to changing security environments and security targets become more difficult for women to penetrate. In Afghanistan in May 2006, the Taliban tried to dupe a six-year old boy, Juma Gul into becoming a suicide bomber. They forced him to wear a vest they said would spray out flowers when he touched the button. They told him that when he saw U.S. soldiers, “throw your body at them.”³⁰ In Iraq the terrorist organizations are recruiting girls as young as fourteen. Although it is unclear how many more women will be mobilized into terrorist groups, it is clear that this trend will continue in the future and include younger and younger women and children.

29 “Taliban Using IRA Bomb Techniques in Terror War”, *Irish Independent*, 03/06/2007, <http://www.independent.ie/world-news/taliban-using-ira-bomb-techniques-in-terror-war-690849.html>.

30 “Taliban Puts Afghan Boy in Suicide Vest”, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-06-25-afghanboy-bomber_N.htm.