Women and Terrorism

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Summary and Keywords

Women are playing an increasingly significant role in terrorism. As men are progressively targeted by security personnel, using female operatives provides terrorist organizations with a “win-win” scenario; if security forces avoid invasively searching women for fear of outraging the local conservative population (based on social norms of women’s modesty and the honor code), women are the ideal stealth operatives. If security personnel are too aggressive in searching women, they aid terrorist recruitment by outraging the men in that society and providing the terrorists with propaganda that “our women” are being violated. In most conflicts, women remain an untapped resource. Recruiting women allows terrorist organizations to access an additional 50% of the population. Female attacks generate greater media attention than those conducted by men. This is especially relevant when media attention is one of the terrorists’ main objectives. Although women’s involvement in terrorist and extremist activities is not a recent development, their presence as frontline activists, propagandists, and recruiters is increasing around the globe.

Keywords: terrorism, empirical international relations theory, boko haram, female suicide bombers, Hizbullah, LTTE, Al Qaeda, terrorist mobilization, Tamil Tigers, terrorists

The Third Oldest Profession for Women

Women’s involvement in political violence is not a recent phenomenon. History is replete with examples of women and terrorism. Women were among the first to join terrorist movements and, in fact, the very first person tried in a court of law for terrorism was Vera Zasulich, an anarchist for Narodnaya Volya, the People’s Will, in Russia (Siljak, 2008).

In 1878, Zasulich was tried for the attempted assassination of Governor Trepov in St. Petersburg. At her trial, she said that she was not a murderer but, rather, she proudly proclaimed: I am a terrorist. After Zasulich was found not guilty and carried away on the shoulders of the crowd, several other prominent female anarchists were tried for terror-related plots. The women of Narodnaya Volya, including Sofia Perovskaya and Vera Figner, participated in several high-profile operations and were involved in one of the anar-
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chists’ last operations, the assassination of the Russian Czar (Figner, 1991; Smith & Carroll, 2001, pp. 233, 310).

In the case of the People’s Will, women’s political rights were addressed specifically in the group’s political platform. Was this at the behest of the women involved in the organization? One of their main goals was to redress the various inequalities in Russian society, not just among the economic and social classes but also between the sexes. As a result, more than a quarter of the People’s Will was comprised of women (Vetter & Perlstein, 1991).

Throughout the 20th century, women have been active in many ethno-nationalist conflicts that have spawned terrorist organizations, as well as in far left political movements in Europe. Women were involved at multiple levels of terrorist organizations from planning operations to disseminating propaganda. In Germany in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the Baader-Meinhoff gang’s ideological leader Ulrike Meinhof, after whom the group was partly named, was a key organizer. Women formed the bulk of the behind-the-scenes support networks for the groups, maintaining safe houses and ferrying weapons, but they also engaged in occasional frontline activities such as bank robberies and driving getaway cars (notably Astrid Proll). The Red Zora (Rote Zora) faction, a breakaway faction of the RZ, was exclusively female and was responsible for 45 cases of arson and bombings from 1977 to 1988 (Deutche Welle, 2007). The Rote Zora bombed the German Supreme Court in Karlsruhe to protest German abortion laws; they bombed sex shops and multinational corporations and opposed genetic engineering, pornography, and the objectification of women (Freilaasung, 1984).

In other parts of Europe, women comprised perhaps no more than 17% of ETA, the Basque separatist party that had formed in the late 1950s, and often joined as family units. According to Carrie Hamilton (2009), although men dominated the leadership of the organization throughout its first decade, a small number of women joined the movement in the 1960s. Some took up arms and engaged in frontline activities. Three women were tried at the notorious Burgos military trial against ETA in 1970, and by the end of that decade, “Yoyes,” Dolores Gonzalez Katarain, had joined ETA’s leadership. But over the past 30 years, women increasingly became charged alongside men with fatal actions. In 2009, ETA appointed a woman, Iratxe Sorzabal Diaz, as its new leader. Four other women joined Ms. Diaz as leaders of the organization the following August. According to newspaper reports:

The five [women] are thought to have been closely involved in the decision to step up violence in a renewed attempt to force Madrid to grant the northwestern Basque region full independence from Spain.

(Meo & Govan, 2009)

In Northern Ireland, women constituted a crucial part of the Provisional IRA. Most of the women, like women in Germany and Spain, provided much-needed support for the men of the group. The women of Belfast and Derry became the not-so-secret weapon of the Provi-
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sional IRA—they were lookouts who raised a racket by banging garbage-can lids when British soldiers approached.¹ Moreover, they shielded fugitive gunmen when squads of troops swooped into the Catholic ghettos, and women such as Marian and Dolores Price sometimes planted bombs.

Over time, women became more and more involved in frontline activities and in violence.² Women began carrying weapons and taking part in armed encounters against British soldiers. Some of the women went on “active service,” meaning that they took on more activist roles and engaged in frontline activities.³

In fact, some of the PIRA’s most dangerous operatives were female. In 1973, the Price sisters made headlines when they received life sentences for the March London bomb attacks that killed one person and seriously injured 216 (Keefe, 2015). The following year, Judith Ward was arrested for bombing the M62 highway, which had caused many civilian casualties, and Roisin McLaughlin was wanted in connection with luring three British soldiers to their deaths (Daily Express, 1975).

Within six months after internment (arrest by British authorities) was introduced, nearly 300 Republican women were taken into custody. Armagh Jail, where the women were housed, bulged at the seams with female political prisoners (Sunday World, 1974). One of the female leaders of the organization, Maire Drumm, was quoted as saying, “for every woman they put in Armagh Jail, there would be fifty more” (Bloom, 2011, p. 86). In Armagh Jail, several women joined Bobby Sands in the hunger strike of 1980, and the women likewise engaged in a parallel no-wash protest—refusing to change their clothes or bathe in hopes of reinstating their special status as political prisoners (rather than as mere criminals) just like the men.⁴

According to IRA Chief Sean Mac Stoífan, one of the most accurate snipers in the Belfast brigade was a teenage girl, while another young woman was their most experienced booby trap expert (Sunday World, 1974). In interviews with the women, they say that they rarely felt any kind of sexual discrimination or second-class status (Bloom, 2009). Mairead Farrell, the female commanding officer (CO) in Armagh, recalled that she was treated as an equal, as were the other women in the IRA. She is quoted as saying, “you got doing what the lads did but it depended to what extent you were committed, not measured by what sex you were” (McGeever, 1986, p. 9). The attitude was that women could do anything the men could. Looking at the political gender balance today, many of those same women have traded in weapons for ballot boxes and are politically elected representatives in Stormont, Northern Ireland’s parliament.

While seminal texts on the history of the Provisional IRA occasionally mention particular famous female activists or PIRA’s female wing known as Cumann na mBan, women tend to be mere footnotes in a broader narrative of violent events. After the early 1980s, women virtually disappear from analyses of the Provisional IRA. To echo feminist critiques, “nothing could be further from the truth than ... claims that in contemporary intra-state ‘low intensity’ wars women stayed away from combat roles were not the case.
Among the Palestinians, women likewise fulfilled many roles both supportive and operational. Women provided important support, but a handful of them engaged in frontline activities like hijackings and ordinance planting. Perhaps the most famous of the Palestinian women engaged in terrorism was Leila Khaled, who became a poster child for Palestinian militancy in the 1970s, after she engaged in several hijackings against Israeli targets for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Another well-known female militant was Dalal Mughrabi, a member of Fatah, who proved to be a source of inspiration when she organized a deadly roadside attack in March 1978 in which 37 Israelis lost their lives (Kershner, 2010). These women helped inspire a whole generation of young women in the refugee camps to follow in their footsteps. Poems, songs, and stories were written about Khaled in over a dozen languages, and a public square, soccer tournament, youth center, and a girl’s summer camp have all been named after Mughrabi (Peteet, 1992, p. 155, Al Hayat alJadida, Jan. 17, 2010). The 1970s also saw the shift in political violence from largely anti-colonial struggles against occupying states to a growing movement of politicized religious movements. Beginning with the emergence of Aum Shinrikyo in the 1980s, terrorist organizations increasingly became apocalyptic and millenarian (believing in the end of days). With this syncretistic blending of belief systems, the age-old adage that terrorists sought to kill a few in order to terrorize was soon replaced with apocalyptic visions in which the goal was to kill as many people as possible in order to bring about the end of days. Terrorist organizations soon adopted new tactics and ideologies.

Thus, generally secular organizations engaged in terrorism during the 1960s and 1970s were soon displaced by groups advocating the use of violence with religious justifications. These new groups, in part because of their religious traditions, did not necessarily view women as potential recruits for the cause. Initially, the religious groups prevented women’s entry into the organizations and, on several occasions, sent female recruits to competing (secular) groups.

As the ethos of terrorism changed, so did its tactics. With a desire for higher body counts, new technologies and tactics were developed to accomplish the task. It is during this time that we see two parallel developments: the introduction of suicide terrorism, first in Iran and then in Lebanon, Kuwait, and Sri Lanka, and an increasing willingness to employ female operatives. These two parallel phenomena would intersect in Lebanon in the 1980s during the Israeli Occupation. Beginning in 1985, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) deployed six female suicide bombers; both Muslim and Christian women were sent to kill Israeli soldiers by being transformed into the ultimate weapon, a living and thinking human bomb (Zedalis, 2004, p. 3).
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Why Female Bombers?

Suicide terrorism was evolving into a tried-and-true tactic for the terrorist organization, which came to be known as Hizbullah, against Israeli, American, and French targets. The SSNP’s tactical use of women differed from the car bombs used to attack stationary targets. The SSNP’s innovation was to use a PBIED (person-borne improvised explosive device) rather than one hidden in a vehicle. The idea was that the PBIED could go undetected and that the individual could make any last-minute adjustments to respond in real time to a security situation. While religious groups scurried to find theological precedent to justify a forbidden act of suicide, secular groups had no such qualms against suicide for a cause and using women to accomplish the task.

In 1985, the SSNP sent 16-year-old Sana’a Mehaidli to a checkpoint to blow up several Israeli border guards. Five other women soon followed suit, and the operatives included women of Christian and Muslim descent. During this same period, the Hizbullah ramped up its multi-pronged terror campaign using a variety of car bombs and PBIEDs, shootings, and stabbings, all intended to drive out the IDF soldiers from Lebanon. The 1983 attack against the U.S. Marine barracks convinced the usually hard-line Ronald Reagan to withdraw U.S. forces from Lebanon. The French forces followed, and although the Israelis abandoned Beirut, the capital, they moved the theater of activity to the southern border and created a “cordon sanitaire,” otherwise known as the security zone, that lasted until June 2000.

The women of the SSNP provided a template for other women to become involved in Middle Eastern groups engaged in terrorist attacks. The women of the SSNP did not take a backstage role to men and, certainly, other militant women around the globe took notice. The fact that the SSNP women included both Muslims and Christians was significant because, at this time, suicide terror was exclusively seen as a part of the Shi’a tradition. Going back historically, the Shi’a faith had a long tradition of martyrdom and the sanctification of sacrifice. The battle of Karbala had witnessed the martyrdom of the prophet’s son Hussein, and the Shi’a faith venerated the martyrs of the past (Dorraj, 1997, p. 489). The tactical innovation provided the opportunity to do the same. Martyrdom museums were erected throughout the southern part of Lebanon’s Beka’a Valley to celebrate the lives and deaths of martyrs, and a culture of martyrdom ensued that convinced young people that they were more valuable dead than they could ever be alive.6

According to some terrorism analysts, the popularity of suicide bombing in Lebanon led to its adoption in other parts of the globe. Two months after the attacks against the U.S. Marine barracks in 1983, a series of suicide bombs were detonated against the American and French embassies in Kuwait City, as well as oil fields and the control tower of Kuwait International Airport. The bombers were allegedly members of the radical Islamic Dawa (the Call) Party with the behind-the-scenes assistance of the Islamic Republic of Iran (as was the case with the 1983 U.S. Marine barracks attacks). According to the congressional
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record (Frontline PBS Timeline, N.D.), 12 of the terrorists were Iraqi and three were Lebanese.

The tactic spread to conflicts afield; in 1987, the LTTE, known as the Tamil Tigers, detonated its first suicide bomb. On July 5th, a truck laden with explosives was driven into a residential building that housed Sri Lankan soldiers at Nelliyady on the Jaffna Peninsula. The driver, Vallipuran Vasanthan, code-named “Captain Miller,” killed almost 128 people including himself. Recent scholarship (Gambetta, 2006, pp. 305–306) suggests that Captain Miller might not have originally intended his attack as a suicide attack, but was unable to exit the vehicle in time. To commemorate the attack, July 5th became known as Black Tigers Day and was celebrated annually with glossy publications of now-famous martyrs and the details of their attacks. The speculation that Miller’s extremely successful attack was not an intentional suicide might explain why the next attack occurred three years later on July 10, 1990, in Valvettithurai when three Sea Tigers, Major Kantharupan, Captain Colin, and Captain Vinoth, attacked the Sri Lankan Navy. The 1991 targeted assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by a woman proved to be so successful, in terms of the publicity the attack garnered as well as the increased revenue from diaspora donations, that the LTTE began to use suicide bombers on a regular basis and successfully attacked presidents, prime ministers, and high-ranking members of the military (Bloom, 2005). Female bombers comprised approximately one-third of the LTTE attacks but tended to cause enormous damage.

Between 1985 and 2008, female suicide bombers committed more than 230 attacks (Romano, 2013), about a quarter of all such acts. Women have become the ideal stealth weapons for terrorist groups. They are less likely to be suspected or searched and, as a result, have been used to strike at the heart of coalition troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. This alarming tactic has been highly effective—gathering more numbers to the terrorists’ cause. Part of the lethality of a suicide attack comes from the actual explosive; the bursting fireball kills anyone near the bomber on impact. Other casualties result from any projectile materials added to the weapon like nails, shrapnel, and ball bearings, all of which tear into the flesh of bystanders, ripping through muscle, skin, and bone. The metal fragments are likely to cause more victims to die from their injuries days later than get killed in the blast. The third reason why an IED is so deadly is that, as the explosive burns, it consumes the oxygen in the room. In enclosed spaces, a minimum amount of explosive could wreak maximum havoc. In a small, confined space, a room will implode under the pressure of the disappearing oxygen. Understanding the physics of terror, the bomber tries to penetrate the target to the farthest part of the room, away from doors and windows that might allow oxygen into the vacuum. Ultimately, this is why Israeli buses during summer (when the air conditioning is on) and winter (when the heat is on) were some of the most attractive targets for Palestinian terror groups. With all of the windows tightly shut, even small amounts of explosive can cause a bus to collapse in upon itself like a tin can being squeezed.
In Palestinian areas, suicide bombers are referred to as martyrs—shahids—and considered heroes within the community. These operatives are even more popular than the heroic figures of the past (e.g., Khaled and Mughrabi) because of the enormous publicity that their attacks generate. Hundreds of people attend their funerals, and their families receive congratulations rather than condolences.\(^8\) The shahids’ lives are celebrated and memorialized on posters, street names, public parks, and occasionally youth camps to encourage little boys and girls to follow in their footsteps. The glossy pre-mission photos of the bombers that the organizations take, often to brand the attack and prevent rival groups from trying to claim credit, are transformed into 12-by-16-foot posters that Palestinian children put up on their bedroom walls replacing their previous idols, American rock and Brazilian soccer stars. Pictures of the bombers are plastered throughout the West Bank and Gaza to celebrate their victories. According to some sources, the amount of space a bomber gets on a poster depends on how many Israelis he or she has killed. If the bomber manages only a few casualties, they might have to share poster space with another bomber or even three (Miller, 2007).

The call-and-response violence makes the conflict multigenerational. Children who are brought up in this environment seek death, and their parents will not dissuade them from following their dream and joining militant movements. While this started with the Palestinians in refugee camps, this parental approval and ersatz consent continues until this day with the increasing participation of children in the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) (Bloom & Horgan, 2017). For the Palestinians, there is a notion that they can die at any moment from aerial bombardment or a stray bullet. Becoming a bomber might in some ways empower the individual to feel that they choose the time and place of their death. When failed female bomber Shefa’a Al-Qudsi was asked whether she would discourage her daughter Diana from following in her footsteps and becoming a martyr, she said that she would teach Diana that education is the most important thing in life. But since the children can be shot coming home from school, the best and brightest can become martyrs, whether or not they want to be. So if Diana wanted to do this, Shefa’a would not stop her (Miller, 2007).

Al-Manar television in Lebanon regularly shows women who endorse their children’s martyrdom. When Um Nidal’s son told her that he wanted to be a martyr for the Islamic jihad, she replied, “May Allah give you the strength and courage. I hope you will become a martyr for Allah. May Allah be thanked, my boy has died for eternal life” (Bloom, 2011, p. 117). Um Nidal, also known as Mariam Farhat (d. 2012), was featured in her son’s last-will-and-testament video before his suicide bombing operation. The video had a huge impact on other would-be bombers. In Beer Sheba Jail, one failed bomber recalls: “I saw with my own eyes a mother who said goodbye to her son a suicide bomber, and gave him the weapon to perform his action. I dream of being like her. When I have a child I will strap the bomb on him myself” (Bloom, 2011).

Farhat capitalized on her son’s fame as a suicide bomber, and within a few years of his self-martyrdom, she ran for election on the Hamas ticket in 2006 and won. She is infa-
mous in Gaza for having sent three of her six sons on suicide missions. Thus, the traditional role for women is to support the men who engage in jihad.

The notion that women are equal to men in jihad has been gaining ground over the past decade, including in ideologies from both Sunni and Shi’a traditions. Sayyid Hussein Fadlallah, the former leader of Hizbullah, stated that jihad is not obligatory for women, yet he expressed no reservations concerning martyrdom operations carried out by women. In his view, Islam permits women to fight in the course of a defensive war and if a martyrdom operation by a woman is necessary (Cook, 2005). According to the leading Sunni religious authorities at Al-Azhar University in Egypt, jihad is not obligatory for women but may be imposed under three conditions: If the enemy invades Muslim lands, it becomes obligatory for every male and female to fight for the cause of Allah; if Muslim leaders call upon the whole Ummah to perform jihad; or if Muslim leaders appoint women to do certain tasks such as monitoring the enemy, laying mines, etc. Under such conditions, women must carry out the duty entrusted to them (Lahoud, 2014).

According to the Qur’an, men and women are equal in terms of their obligation (fard) and personal responsibility for holy war, and they are rewarded equally for their actions. It is only because of the practical limitations that restrict women’s movements in Islamic societies that most of the women who carry out martyrdom operations are related to male jihadis (Al-Qaradawi, N.D.). Sheikh Yusuf al Qadarawi, dean of Islamic Studies at the University of Qatar, has endorsed female suicide bombers throughout the Islamic world in his fatwas. Some scholars will even trace this legitimation of female bombers to Abdullah Azzam, the Palestinian cofounder of Al Qaeda, who discussed women’s obligation to carry out the jihad years before any juridical rulings existed and well before Al Qaeda softened on the idea of female operatives.

Azzam issued a fatwa in 1979, which stated that women (and children) are required to participate in jihad as an individual obligation to defend “Muslim lands.” Despite Azzam’s support, (Al-Qaeda) Al Qaeda’s core leadership had previously done little to encourage female participation in the battlefield, focusing instead on their role as fundraisers and supporters of the mujahideen (Azzam, N.D.).

The majority of Al Qaeda’s members are men, and its power base is decidedly masculine. Up to today, there are no women in the core leadership of Al Qaeda al Sulba, the heart and soul of the global jihad. Beyond the core is an amorphous movement with loosely connected offshoot organizations in countries all over the world, with sympathizers who do not always engage in violence. Al Qaeda is often described as a patriarchal organization that excludes women. Yet the reality is more complicated. Women are among its most fervent supporters, and some participate in the offshoot organizations, though it is rare for women to be on the front lines (Davis, N.D., p. 1). As in ancient times, women fight but not in battle (Bloom, 2013). There is an army of female organizers, proselytizers, teachers, translators, and fundraisers who either enlist with their husbands or succeed those who are jailed or killed.
A significant development in women’s participation in the global jihad has been the dissemination of radical ideologies online. The Internet has afforded jihadi women like Malikka el-Aroud in Belgium the opportunity to participate in jihad without compromising their position and earning an inferior status in society. Articles, communiqués, and online chat rooms offer women the space to express their fanatical support. In Italy, Umm Yahya Aisha (Barbara) Farina directs the website and blog Al Muhajidah Magazine. The October 2001 edition after 9/11 featured an editorial entitled “I support the Taliban” and featured a picture of President George Bush with the caption “Wanted dead or alive, commander of crusade” (Bloom, 2011, p. 201). In 2010, Colleen LaRose (Jihad Jane) and her friend Jaime Ramirez (Jihad Jamie) were arrested for plotting to kill Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks for portraying the Prophet Muhammed with the body of a dog. The same artist was the target of a shooter in February 2014, after he survived both the plot by Ms. LaRose and the attack against the café in Copenhagen (CNN, N.D.).

While the core of Al Qaeda refuses to permit women’s participation, Ayman al Zawahiri acknowledges that women have played a role in other areas of the Dar al Harb (House of War) in the global jihad. In Algeria, the “Al Qaeda in the Maghreb group” uses women in bombing campaigns. Women are largely responsible for providing support materials like medicine, food, and clothes; others have more significant roles. To a woman who asked Zawahiri whether she should participate in jihad in the Maghreb, he responded that while jihad is a universal obligation for both men and women, if by joining the jihad, she had to abandon her children, she should not do it.

For jihadi women, Zawahiri’s comment came as a shock and disappointment. More to the point, his comments did not reflect the reality of women’s involvement in Iraq or in other conflicts in which women have played important roles in the jihad. Online, some women pleaded for the right to get involved in jihad. “How many times have I wished I were a man ... When Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri said there are no women in Al Qaeda, he saddened and hurt me,” wrote one woman who allegedly listened to the speech 10 times. “I felt that my heart was about to explode in my chest ... I am powerless” (Associated Press, 2008).

At the same time that Ayman al Zawahiri made explicit that there were no women in Al Qaeda, his wife Umayma released a statement explaining that women had a role to play in jihad, including as suicide bombers (Hassan, 2012).

Al Qaeda has understood the attraction of the Internet for female jihadists and has created a number of web-based social media designed to help women mobilize other women as well as men. Its first foray came in August 2004 with the launch of a web-based magazine called Al-Khansa’a—named for the pre-Islamic female poet and convert who wrote laments for her brothers killed in battle. The webzine was published by the “Women’s information office in the Arab Peninsula,” and its contents include articles on women’s appropriate behavior, supporting their male jihadi relatives, terrorist training camps, and even the occasional recipe. Its first issue, with a bright pink cover and gold embossed lettering, appeared in August 2004 with a lead article entitled “Biography of the Female Mu-
jahedeen.” Since Al Khansa’a, the online magazine Inspire released a 31-page women’s glossy magazine called Al Shamikha.\textsuperscript{15} Al Shamikha, dubbed the jihadi Cosmo, was issued in March 2011 and provided women with guidance on how to marry a mujahedeen, advised women about etiquette, and offered beauty tips (Glossy, 2011).

Only a handful of Al Qaeda women have engaged in violence. The majority of Al Qaeda’s female supporters have successfully goaded men to participate and have ensured that male members of the organization remained steadfast and did not defect. The militant jihadi women have emerged as part of Al Qaeda’s affiliated groups rather than in the core, since most of the core ideologues oppose women’s participation still today. The affiliated organizations have been more practical and flexible when it comes to women’s participation. When using women will succeed where men fail, conservative ideologies go by the wayside. Thus, the increased use of women bombers in Palestine, Chechnya, North Africa, and Somalia flouts Islamic precepts that women cannot participate in martyrdom operations.

The attacks against the Moscow subways and airports are cases in point. In the early 2000s, while working in tandem, teams of female Chechen bombers (from Dagestan) managed to kill dozens of people at high-value targets that were allegedly well guarded. They were able to do so because women operatives are often able to maintain the element of surprise, since there is no real profile for a female suicide bomber.

Bombers have ranged in age from teenaged girls to a grandmother and from women of Middle Eastern descent to blonde-haired, blue-eyed European and American converts. Terrorist organizations know that female bombers generate eight times the amount of media attention that men do using the same tactics.\textsuperscript{16} They also know that an attractive woman can be an excellent distraction. If there are several women to choose from, they will select the more attractive ones. The women chosen for missions are literally bombshells (i.e., some of the most attractive women in their communities). Looks aside, women, especially in the Middle East and South Asia, dressed in traditional clothing like the niqab or the silwar kameez, can hide an IED effectively and, if anything, might give the impression of late-term pregnancy—yet another excellent disguise.

Abusing a population’s women might have the desired effect of demoralizing the men in the short term, but in the long run, it will only increase the number of women joining the movement. Abusive behavior is also guaranteed to alienate huge numbers of the civilian population. To paraphrase U.S. General David Petreaus, in every conflict, the population is the prize. Winning over any population is the best way to separate it from the terrorists embedded in its midst (Ricks, 2009, p. 26).

According to a report by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior (2008), over a hundred women were arrested for terrorist-related activities, 70 of whom have been tried by the government and are behind bars (Ali & Post, 2008). Most if not all of the female suicide bombers are relatives of male terrorists. The filial connection is no accident. The terrorist organizations deliberately recruit women who have a brother, father, or son already affiliated with one of the groups. In part, this is a vetting process, a way of being assured that the
person is not providing information to the other side and can be trusted to complete the mission assigned to them. Also, a woman would shame her entire family if she changed her mind about going through with the mission; this is a significant social pressure. According to a former U.S. military officer, “more women are being exposed to jihadi propaganda through the men who bring home videos to watch them. Women are also watching the same indoctrination videos” (Ali & Post, 2008).

Moreover, the women who have lost loved ones find themselves marginalized in the society and especially vulnerable to predation. There are over a hundred thousand widows in Iraq because of the war and the sectarian violence amid the various communities. Al Qaeda in Iraq succeeded in deepening women’s depression by using the tragedies to their advantage. Many of the women are poor and borderline illiterate. Al Qaeda recruiters exploit their poverty, despair, resentment, and eagerness to take revenge against the American troops to recruit them. The women are exploited based on three factors: tribal affiliation, financial pressure, and revenge for the loss of family.

The idea that women who are sexually abused can be funneled into terrorist organizations is not new; however, soldiers from the other side perpetrate most of the sexual atrocities in other cases of terrorism. In Chechnya, girls raped by Russian soldiers at checkpoints or Tamil women sexually abused by Sri Lankan government Sinhalese soldiers have been the hallmarks of the conflict. These formerly victimized women reinvent themselves as the terrorist groups funnel them into suicide bomber brigades and capitalize on the idea that women can avenge their honor by killing as many of the enemy’s soldiers as possible.

While there have been a handful of high-profile cases of Iraqi women being raped by U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib, including the case of Abeer al-Janabi, the 14-year-old girl who was raped and killed, there have been shockingly few cases of rape reported in the U.S. or foreign media (and fewer military courts-martial) compared to previous foreign wars. Part of the explanation for this decrease in sexual violence against local women is one of access. U.S. soldiers say that they do not encounter many Iraqi women on a daily basis (al-Janabi was stalked by the soldiers for several weeks and attacked in her own home). Part of the explanation is the social sanction against looking at, let alone talking to, local women, and part of the explanation is the availability of U.S. servicewomen and female contractors—who have been increasingly victimized during their tours of duty. Thus, the level of violence perpetrated by the soldiers averages about the same as other foreign wars, but the targets have changed from foreign to domestic (Al Muhajidah Magazine, Oct. 2001).

In fact, the majority of Iraqi women raped in Iraq over the course of the war have not been attacked by foreign soldiers. A new and insidious practice has emerged, one in which the women are raped by members of their own community in order to create squads of suicide bombers (McGowan, 2009). Initially, such allegations by the Iraqi government were assumed to be exaggerations to undermine the popularity of the insurgent Sunni organizations in Iraq. However, in February of 2009, Samira Ahmed Jassim was arrested for arranging the rape of 80 girls over a period of two years to turn them into sui-
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cide bombers for Ansar al Sunnah. Of the 80 girls victimized, 28 successfully carried out operations by the time Jassim was arrested by the Iraqi police. Jassim’s confession offers some insight into the growing wave of suicide attacks by women in the past two years. She confirmed what several military and intelligence officials have contended: that the Iraqi insurgents prey on women in dire social and economic situations who are suffering from emotional or psychological problems or abuse (Myers, 2009).

For the most part, the Iraqi female suicide bombers have been coerced, intimidated, and often brainwashed into carrying out suicide operations. The terrorist groups target underage women who are living on the streets and have no men to protect them. Most of the bombers have no religious background whatsoever and can be manipulated into thinking that such operations are “Allah’s will” and are justified in the Qur’an and Hadith. At other times, the women are simply tricked. They are told that the packages they are transporting contain contraband, but their minders detonate the IEDs using remote controls before the duped women ever know they have “volunteered” for a mission.

There is a considerable amount of pressure on the women to perform acts of self-sacrifice. The pressures range from subtle social pressure to do something for their community to more blatant forms of coercion like kidnapping and sexual assault. The face of terrorism is changing—and it is now often a woman’s face. No longer can we expect terrorists to look a certain way, be a certain age, or be male. The arrests in the United States of Jihad Jane and Jihad Jamie—two blue-eyed, blonde-haired women—and the suicide attack in Iraq of convert Muriel Degauque epitomize the increase of women participating in all levels of terrorist organizations. Women are becoming key players. They can even be found in the most seemingly chauvinistic and male-dominated terrorist organizations, like Al Qaeda.

While women have always been involved in terrorism, their numbers did not manifest a significant portion of activists. In most cases, women have never comprised more than 30% of the total. According to Leonard Weinberg and Bill Eubanks’s study, women comprised only a small percentage of terrorists even in the European groups that were considered more egalitarian. The majority of terrorist organizations put the struggle against imperialism or against occupation before women’s rights. To that end, few women emerged from this period as leaders for the next generations.

Although people might assume that women’s participation in terrorism or in any form of political violence might help level the society in terms of the equality between men and women, the reality is not the case.

It is only in cases where women are not just cannon fodder as bombers but also participate as leaders and ideologues that women’s involvement helps the status of women in society as a whole. If the best and brightest women of the society become suicide bombers, the next generation of female leaders will actually be eliminated.
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**Notes:**


(2.) Linen Hall Northern Ireland Political Collection (NIPC) ceased collection on this subject after 1988 with Farrell’s death, and no additional files have been collected since, thus making research on the contemporary period challenging.

(3.) Interviews with the author, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 2009.
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(5.) Linen Hall ceased to collect materials about female volunteers, fieldwork, 2009–2010.

(6.) Martyrdom in Islam connotes several different kinds of deaths. Martyr is translated in Arab as Shahid, which means one who bears witness. In Arabic, different grammatical forms are used to connote different “kinds” of martyrs. Suicide bombers tend to be translated as self-martyrs, in which the reflexive grammatical form is use (Ishtish’had), whereas martyrs are also individuals killed while defending Islam. Thus, the martyr museums include both members of Hizbullah who died fighting Israeli, Maronite and Phalange forces, as well as those who chose to take their own lives.

(7.) The LTTE publication, Kalhaththil (In the Battle Front), July 29, 1999, lists all the successful suicide attacks carried out by the LTTE between 1987 and 1995.

(8.) Jailed bomber, interview with Shimon Dotan, 2005.

(9.) Martyr operations: A means of jihad, Bayynat, the website of the religious authority Sayyid Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah.

(10.) Islam Online, Ask a Scholar, Dr. Abdel Fattah Idrees, professor of comparative jurisprudence, Al Azhar University, Muslim women participating in jihad.


(13.) Risala illa Akhawat al Islami.


(17.) Several Halliburton employees are claiming to have been raped by U.S. soldiers (e.g., Jaime Lee Jones). Also, many of the returning soldiers have returned with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which has resulted in an upsurge of domestic violence, suicide, and killing of spouses after their return. The 4th Infantry’s Second Battalion (the “Lethal Warriors”) have had eight members accused of murder or attempted murder since 2007. One soldier from the company, Robert Marko Hull, raped and slit the throat of a 19-year-old learning-disabled woman after his return from Iraq. See Tim McGirk, The hell of PTSD, Time Magazine, November 30, 2009 (pp. 41–43).
(18.) In Algeria, Al Qaeda-affiliated groups have also had male recruits raped to prepare them to be suicide bombers. Intense social stigma and fear of more male-on-male sex attacks leaves Muslims prepared to die. According to news reports, there was a large tear in a terrorist’s anus that confirmed the allegations of sexual abuse. The young terrorist was aged 22, from Diar El Djemaâ, El Harrach, and was supposed to execute a suicide operation in the region of Boumerdes. Al Qaeda was accused of using male rape to “create” suicide bombers, *Pink News*, February 4, 2009.

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