

Middle East Strategy at Harvard

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on 14 Aug 2008 at 10:04 am [4 Yoram Schweitzer](#)

Lindsey O'Rourke's recent *New York Times* [op-ed](#) was a worthy contribution to our discussion of female suicide bombers, and the conversation conducted in [this thread](#) has built nicely upon O'Rourke's work. I offer the observations below (based on [my research](#)) in the hopes of further texturing this debate.

From the vantage point of summer 2008, it seems safe to state that we cannot attribute suicide terrorism to any one factor. Ethno-cultural nationalism; religious fanaticism; group dynamics and leadership style; occupation—all can play a part in an organization's decision to dispatch suicide bombers and in an individual's decision to carry out an attack. Thus, we see that while suicide attacks are used in struggles against occupying forces, they are also frequently used in inter-ethnic conflict, e.g. the struggle in Pakistan. Indeed, in Iraq, inter-ethnic and inter-sectarian suicide attacks have almost overshadowed those directed at the foreign occupation forces. In order to plumb the true depths of this increasingly widespread phenomenon, then, it must be explored through as many of the angles involved as possible.

We are often moved to focus primarily on the personal considerations that induce humans to abrogate their survival instinct in such murderous fashion. It is perhaps best, though, to direct most of our attention towards the considerations that lead organizations to deploy suicide bombers. This, because suicide bombers are, mostly, pawns, who rarely have a voice in their organization's higher echelons, or in its decision-making process. Organizational factors also appear to be somewhat more predictive than the other factors involved in these decisions. Indirect diffusion unquestionably does impact upon an organization's decision to incorporate suicide terrorism into its arsenal. Indeed, we might imagine that, had suicide terrorism been widely in use during the 60's and 70's, this MO might have become more widespread. In many instances, however, strong ties to a group that aggressively espouses suicide terrorism can influence the decision to adopt this tactic to a much greater degree. To illustrate this point, consider that Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Afghani Taliban did not employ this tactic until AQ central persuaded them to do so.

Female suicide bombers have even less control over their deployment than their male counterparts. Thus, when studying female suicide bombings, it is even more important to resist the impulse to center on the personal motivations driving these women, and to explore the organizational considerations that occasioned their deployment. Such calculations might

include a need to overcome conditions that make it difficult or impossible to deploy male bombers. Resource allocation can also factor into these decisions: in the ultra-conservative patriarchal societies in which these dramas often play out, the idea of women receiving personal training and attention from men is borderline-taboo. Accordingly, it is difficult for women in these societies to acquire the training necessary to become combat-effective. Suicide bombings, then, which require only the easily-acquired abilities to mask one's intent and detonate one's payload, often become the only road open to women who've decided to contribute actively to the fighting. As such, it can seem more desirable to dispatch women on these missions than men, who can, after all, be trained to carry out other functions. Organizations have also been known to deploy female bombers in order to heighten their media profile: despite the fact that women have participated in suicide terrorism throughout the modern era, the near universal perception of women as givers, rather than takers of life, still ensures that the use of female suicide bombers will shock audiences and thus, will garner media attention.

None of this is to imply that it isn't worth our time to explore the motivations that drive individuals to execute suicide attacks. These studies can disclose critical information, such as the fact that, apart from the same factors that influence men to walk down this tragic path, women are often driven to execute suicide attacks by a set of considerations that apply uniquely to them. We've already addressed one way in which ultra-conservative, Islamist norms shunt women into suicide attacks. The fact that such societies customarily label as deviants those women who engage in behaviors that would go unremarked upon in men—such as remaining unmarried at a late age, failing to have children, having pre- or extra-marital sex—can also play a part in this decision: Rather than bear this cross, women may be driven to seek expiation through so-called martyrdom operations. Parenthetically, it bears repeating that I've encountered women who rationalized their attempted suicides in terms that were almost identical to those used by men.

While conservative Islamic mores can make women willing, if not eager, to execute suicide attacks, they make it less likely that women will participate in suicide terrorism in the same numbers as their male counterparts. Fears that incorporating women into the ranks will destabilize the patriarchal status quo, wherein women are the bearers and rearers of Jihadists, rather than Jihadists themselves; fears that using women will telegraph the message that the organization's male warriors "aren't men enough for the job"; all seem to outweigh the new *fatwas* that license female entry into this arena.

In this context, it is worth noting that the fact that women are so rarely deployed on these missions makes it somewhat difficult to determine whether they are indeed more successful suicide bombers than their male counterparts. Women only constitute, after all, roughly ten percent of suicide bombers. How, then, are we to compare their actions with those of their male counterparts? Victim count? Most successful male vs. most successful female? There are simply too many variables in this equation to allow us to resolve it satisfactorily. The idea that women are more suitable for assassination operations, while intriguing, would also seem to require further investigation.

Finally, it is perhaps worth revisiting the idea that using female suicide bombers is a win-win proposition. While female suicide bombers are often publicly canonized in the Islamic world, in off-camera discussions with Palestinian families and dispatchers, as well as with failed female suicide bombers, significant reservations often arose over the idea of using women in this capacity. Their discomfort is a product both of the fact that such women inevitably come into close contact with males before being dispatched (perhaps even being touched by men whilst donning the suicide belt) and of the fact that they might end up in Israeli jails, unable to maintain requisite standards of modesty and at the mercy of Israeli men. This contact is often seen as a stain upon the woman's honor and by extension, upon the reputation of the family as a whole. It would seem then, that even though, as Mia Bloom astutely [discerns](#), female suicide bombers are indeed often very useful tools, those who employ women in such capacities will ultimately pay a severe price for doing so—a price that will likely be exacted by the clans of the dispatched women.

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