

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

October 9, 2003

FEMALE SUICIDE BOMBERS FOR GOD

Yoram Schweitzer
Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

The suicide bomber who struck Maxim's Restaurant in Haifa on October, killing 19 people and wounding dozens of others, was a 29-year-old lawyer sent by the fundamentalist terrorist group Palestinian Islamic Jihad. She was also a woman. Does the use of a female terrorist bomber constitute a turning point in the policy of fundamentalist terrorist organizations?

Before this attack, six other women were sent by "secular" organizations to blow themselves up in Israeli cities and more than twice as many had volunteered for suicide missions but were caught before they could act. Female suicide bombers have also been active in the ranks of terrorist organizations elsewhere in the world since the mid-1980s. The first was a 17-year-old Lebanese girl named Sana Mehaydali, known to her admirers as "The Bride of the South." In 1985, she was dispatched by the PPS, a secular, pro-Syrian Lebanese organization, to blow herself up near some vehicles carrying Israeli soldiers in Lebanon.

This paved the way for several other Lebanese women acting on behalf of other secular terrorist organizations. From Lebanon, the use of female suicide bombers spread to other countries and within a few years was adopted by ethnic-national movements like the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and the Kurdish P.K.K. Women of the

"Black Tigers" unit of the Tamil Tigers have accounted for about a third of the 240 suicide bombings in Sri Lanka, while P.K.K. women have carried out about two thirds of that organization's suicide bombings. And in the last year, women have played a central role in the Chechen campaign of suicide bombings directed against Russians in Grozny and Moscow. In fact, women have been responsible for about half of the suicide bombings, and in the international media they are referred to by the symbolic name "black widows." It should be noted that the Chechen terrorist organizations act in the name of an ethnic-national ideology but are thought to be cooperating with global jihad organizations connected to al-Qaeda, and among their commanders are alumni of Afghanistan. It may actually turn out to be the case that the growth in the number of Chechen female suicide bombers signals the beginning of a change in the position of fundamentalist Islamic organizations with respect to the involvement of women in suicide attacks.

Until recently, the use of female suicide bombers was a clear indicator of secular terrorism, but the distinction between "secular" and "religious," in this respect, has become increasingly blurred. The willingness of fundamentalist Islamic organizations to make use

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

www.dayan.org/

of women in their suicide operations contradicts the principles of religion as well as traditional social norms that preclude the involvement of women in “masculine” activities that require close contact with men to whom they are not married. These contradictions have been fiercely debated by religious figures authorized to grant legal approval of the suicide operations carried out by religious terrorist organizations. But in choosing between the competing claims of religious strictures and practical needs, religious authorities who support suicide attacks, such as Sheikh Qardawi and Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, have predictably found an appropriate legal justification that permits the involvement of women.

The willingness of fundamentalist terrorist organizations to use women despite the dilemma posed by religion and tradition stems from their understanding of the 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 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 as well as concerns about possibly opening a Pandora’s Box of demands by women for rights and freedoms currently denied them.

The selection of candidates for suicide operations and the methods used to persuade them are generally similar to those employed for males. An examination of the global phenomenon of suicide bombers across a range of countries and national-cultural contexts, in both secular and religious organizations, reveals few differences with respect to gender. Organizational leaders and handlers, who take advantage of their innocence, enthusiasm, loss of focus, and often their personal distress and thirst for revenge, expose women as well as men to intense indoctrination and manipulation. The “persuaders” offer a course and sense of direction that many have lost due to personal

circumstances, as well as seemingly magic solutions to their problems, infused with national or religious symbols and promises to them and their families of concrete rewards in this world and, quite frequently, in the next world, as well.

This first “successful” suicide attack by woman acting for a fundamentalist Palestinian organization -- there were previous attempts but they were intercepted or aborted -- constitutes a further erosion of the restraints those organizations place on themselves. It is therefore likely that this will not be last time that fundamentalist organizations use a female suicide bomber in Israel or elsewhere. Nevertheless, women are not likely to take on a dominant role in the terror campaign. Hamas, in contrast to Islamic Jihad, has always given greater weight to practical considerations and been less punctilious about the ideological content of its actions. Even so, it has hitherto limited women to supporting roles in suicide bombings, such as the attack on Sbarro Restaurant in Jerusalem in 2001. Still, the spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Yassin, has not excluded a direct role for women and has even provided an appropriate *a priori* legal justification.

It is also possible that al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups, whose leaders have thus far refrained from involving women in their operations except in a support role, will change course in the future. A hint of this may be seen in the recent capture of two young girls in Morocco on their way to a suicide attack. The “religious-ideological” distance that al-Qaeda will have to travel in order to involve women in suicide bombings apparently constitutes a difficult challenge for it. Still, if tactical-operational considerations require that and the promised result seems worthwhile in their eyes, they may well cross that Rubicon, too, and then find some retroactive religious justification. In short, there is a real prospect that fundamentalist terrorists will begin to imitate their secular counterparts and make much greater use of female suicide bombers in the future.