

The Palestinian and Israeli Media on Female Suicide Terrorists

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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.¹

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.