

Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists

Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova

Chechnya's notorious "Black Widows" have been active since June 7, 2000 when the first Chechen female suicide bombers, Khava Barayeva, cousin of well-known Chechen field commander Arbi Barayev, and Luisa Magomadova drove a truck filled with explosives into the temporary headquarters of an elite OMON (Russian Special Forces) detachment in the village of Alkhan Yurt in Chechnya. The attack resulted in two dead and five wounded. Since then Chechen female terrorists have been involved in twenty-two of the twenty-seven suicide attacks (81 percent of the total number) attributed to Chechen rebels. There were a total of 110 bombers¹ in the period reviewed, forty-seven of whom were women (43 percent of the total; see table 1).²

Chechen women bombers were named Black Widows by the Russian and international press when it became clear that many were acting in revenge for the deaths of their husbands, sons, and brothers. Since the Dubrovka Theater takeover in October 2002, in which nineteen female bombers appeared in black mourning clothes with bombs strapped to their bodies, we have engaged in a particular multi-dimensional means of studying these terrorists. The first avenue involved interviewing surviving hostages who had the opportunity to observe and converse with the bomb-girded women, which provides a singular perspective on suicide terrorists. The second measure involved interviewing the women's family members and close associates in Chechnya after the death or arrest of the bombers, to construct a type of psychological post-mortem of the bomber.³ The third measure was studying news reports and talking to Russian security officials involved in the investigations of such cases. To date we have a sample of forty-five interviews with family members, close associates, or former hostages of thirty-four suicide bombers, twenty-six of them Chechen female suicide terrorists.

Table 1. Summary of Suicide Terror Attacks Attributed to Chechens (June 2000-June 2005)

	Date	Place	Total terrorists	Female terrorists	Male terrorists	Fatalities	Injured victims	Hostages	Terrorists' outcome
1	June 7, 2000	Chechnya, Alkhan-Yurt military base (Khava Barayeva, Luiza Magomadova)	2	2	0	2	5	0	Dead
2	June, 2000	Chechnya, military checkpoint	1	0	1	?	?	0	Dead
3	July 2, 2000	Chechnya, military base (Movladi)	1	0	1	33	81	0	Dead
4	Dec. 2000	Chechnya, MVD building (Mareta Duduyeva)	1	1	0	?	?	0	Wounded, later dead
5	Nov. 29, 2001	Chechnya, Urus-Martan, Military office (Elza Gazueva)	1	1	0	1	3	0	Dead
6	Feb. 5, 2002	Chechnya, Grozny, Zavodskoy ROVD (Zarema Inarkaeva)	1	1	0	23	17	0	Wounded
7	Oct. 23-26, 2002	Moscow, Dubrovka Theater	40	19	21	129	644	<800	Dead
8	Dec. 27, 2002	Chechnya, Grozny, governmental complex (Tumrievs family)	3	1	2	83	<200	0	Dead
9	May 12, 2003	Chechnya, Znamenskaya, governmental complex	3	1	2	59	111	0	Dead
10	May 14, 2003	Chechnya, Iliskhan-Yurt, religion festival (<i>Shahidat</i> Shahbulatova, Zulay Abdurzakova)	2	2	0	18	145	0	Dead
11	June 5, 2003	North Osetia, Mozdok military base (Lida Khildehoroeva)	1	1	0	17	16	0	Dead
12	June 20, 2003	Chechnya, Grozny, governmental complex (Zakir Abdulazimov)	2	1	1	6	38	0	Dead
13	July 5, 2003	Moscow, rock festival (Zulikhan Elihadjieva, Mariam Sharapova)	2	2	0	14	60	0	Dead
14	July 11, 2003	Moscow, Tverskaya Street (Zarema Mujikhoeva)	1	1	0	1	0	0	Survived
15	July 27, 2003	Chechnya, Grozny, military building (Mariam Tashukhadjieva)	1	1	0	?	?	0	Dead
16	Aug. 1, 2003	North Osetia, military hospital	1	0	1	35	300	0	Dead
17	Dec. 5, 2003	Southern Russian near Yessentuki, train (Khadijat Mangerieva)	4	3	1	41	<150	0	Dead
18	Sept. 15, 2003	Ingushetia, FSB office	2	1	1	2	31	0	Dead
19	Dec. 9, 2003	Moscow, National Hotel near Duma	1	1	0	6	14	0	Dead

	Date	Place	Total terrorists	Female terrorists	Male terrorists	Fatalities	Injured victims	Hostages	Terrorists' outcome
20	Feb. 6, 2004	Moscow subway station Avtozavodskaya	1	0	1	41	<130	0	Dead
21	April 6, 2004	Ingushetia, president's car	1	0	1	2	25	0	Dead
22	Aug. 25, 2004	Airplane TU-134 Moscow-Volgograd (Sazita Jebirhanova)	1	1	0	43	0	0	Dead
23	Aug. 25, 2004	Airplane TU-154 Moscow-Sochi (Aminat Nogaeva)	1	1	0	42	0	0	Dead
24	Aug. 31, 2004	Moscow, subway station Rijskaya	1	1	0	10	33	0	Dead
25	Sept. 1-3, 2004	North Osetia, Beslan school (Roza Nogaeva, Mariam Tuburova)	32	2	30	330	470	1120	Dead
26	May, 2005	Chechnya, Grozny	1	1	0	0	0	0	Dead
27	May, 2005	Chechnya, Assinovskaya	2	2	0	0	0	0	Dead
	Total		110	47	63	938	2473	1920	
	Percent		100%	43%	57%				

The total of forty-seven Chechen female bombers is based on reports of twenty-five successful female bombers (i.e., they detonated their bombs and died by truck, car bomb, or improvised explosive device – suicide belt or bag, including two who exploded bombs on airplanes); three unsuccessful female bombers (two exploded their devices but were wounded only; one walked away from her bomb-filled rucksack); and nineteen women who took part in the Dubrovka takeover (who wore bombs wrapped around their bodies but did not die by self-detonation). There is some controversy as to whether or not the Dubrovka bombers were indeed suicide bombers, as their plan to die by exploding themselves was interrupted by the Russian Special Forces gassing and storming the building. Instead, the females died of gunshots to the head after succumbing to the gas. We have strong confirmation from many family members, close associates, and hostages of these individuals' intent to self-detonate, as well as evidence of intent in the fact that the women were already clad with suicide belts. Thus, we take their stated intent and their behavior of strapping on bombs as strong enough evidence to classify them as suicide bombers for the purpose of this analysis. We consider this analogous to the many Palestinian bombers currently incarcerated who were thwarted in the last moments before their attempts, but who are also closely studied to understand the psychology and psycho-social aspects of suicide bombers.

We lack demographic data on all of the bombers, but of those about whom we conducted specific psychological interviews (n=34; 26 female and 8 male) the females range in age from fifteen to thirty-eight. They include both married and unmarried, and of those who were married, some were mothers while at least one suffered from infertility. Thirteen were single, three were married, four divorced, five were widows, and one was in a second marriage. As is true of suicide bombers active in other arenas,⁴ the female bombers in our sample were as educated as their peers of the same age. More than 65 percent (65.3 percent – 17/26) had finished high school (ages 14-16, as per the Chechen system); 11.5 percent (3/26) were currently studying in college (ages 17-20); 4 percent (1/26) had finished college; and 19.2 percent (5/26) had finished their university studies (table 2).

Table 2. Demographic Data, Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists 2000-2005 (n=26)

Marital Status	Education Completed	Economic Status	Previous Religiosity	Relation to Wahhabism	Trauma*
13 – single	17 – high school	2 – poor	22 – secular Muslims	19 – connected after traumas	12 – more than one family member killed
3 – married	1 – college	14 – middle	4 – traditionally religious	7 – connected through family	4 – father or mother was killed
4 – divorced	5 – university	9 – good			6 – brother killed
5 – widowed	3 – in college	1 – high			1 – husband killed
1 – remarried					3 – family members arrested or disappeared after arrest
					2 – general societal traumas

* Total greater than sample size as some individuals suffered multiple types of traumas

Motivational Sets

Trauma

As far as we could discern, none of the Chechen suicide bombers in our sample had a serious personality disorder prior to deciding to join a terror group. No less important, however, is that all individuals within the sample had experienced deep personal traumatization, and evidence of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative phenomena as a result of direct personal traumatization were present in the entire sample. This level of psychological traumatization was very likely one of the deepest leading motivational factors that drew the Chechen bombers into embracing terrorism ideologies and, ultimately, terrorist acts.⁵

As far as we are able to reconstruct, nearly all of the Chechen suicide bombers (male and female) followed a very similar path to becoming first radicalized and then eventually purveyors of violence. Nearly all of those we studied lost close family members in air raids, bombings, landmines, so called “cleansing” operations carried out by Russian forces, and in battle. Many personally witnessed the death, beating, or other mistreatment of a family member at the hands of the Russians. Family members and close acquaintances of the terrorists noticed that as the violent death of a family member or other societal trauma wrought a deep personal impact, the “soon to become” terrorist underwent a psychological crisis in which feelings of unresolved grief, anger, depression, psychological trauma, and guilt for not having done more to save the family member became obvious. According to the reports of family members and close associates, the following changes were observed in the female suicide bombers following their traumatic experiences: depression in 73 percent (19/26); social alienation and isolation in 92 percent (24/26); aggression in 23 percent (6/26); and repetitive talking about a strong desire for revenge in 31 percent (8/26). In the majority of cases (73 percent – 19/26), those who ultimately became bombers sought a connection to Wahhabist groups⁶ soon after the trauma and in direct reaction to it; in a minority of cases (27 percent – 7/26) they were already affiliated with the Wahhabist groups by marriage or family ties but began to become more deeply invested in seeking the terror-promoting aspects of these groups.

Revenge

It appears as if answers to the psychological trauma and a means of expressing and responding to traumatic grief were sought by the bereaved and traumatized individuals through their taking on the jihadist ideology. Indeed, this ideology met needs inherent both within the Chechen tradition of seeking revenge for the killing of a family member and as defined by general traumatic stress theory.⁷ In Chechnya the traditional concept of revenge for social injustices enacted toward families changes dramatically in trauma victims as traumatic experiences impact on the individual’s views regarding the moral basis of revenge. Traditionally Chechens live by an ethos of revenge that mandates that when a loved one is harmed or killed, it is the responsibility of the family members to locate the evildoer and exact due recompense. This ideology of revenge is strictly codified and does not normally spread beyond seeking out the originator of the harm or his close family and requiting his evil deed. Recently, however, with widespread war, traumatization and bereavement, and the importation of a terrorist mentality this mindset is changing: revenge is becoming generalized in the minds of many. Akhmedova found in her study of 653 clinical

subjects who had undergone war traumas that those who had the highest levels of post-traumatic effects underwent a transformation in this regard. They endorsed revenge in 39 percent of the cases and no longer considered revenge as a duty to find and repay in kind the person who had harmed their family, but instead generalized their revenge to enact harm on the ethnic sector from which the harm had originated (i.e., the Russian military or civilians). With increased traumatization generalized revenge became both sufficient and acceptable. There were also positive correlations between the endorsement for revenge and increasing levels of religiosity, aggression, suspiciousness, and negativism.⁸ We conclude that all of the women in our sample had revenge as a motive. Indeed, before their terror acts, 54 percent (14/26) of the women had stated spontaneously to those we interviewed that they would seek revenge for the violent death of their family member at the hands of the Russians.

Religious Ideology

Generally a person who undergoes a deep personal trauma experiences a shattering of world assumptions⁹ (for example, regarding personal safety, predictability, and goodness of the world) and often undergoes a dissociative response¹⁰ to the trauma in which certain elements are just too emotionally overwhelming and painful to incorporate at once into one's sense of self in the world. Trauma victims are often dissociative in response to their experiences, displaying amnesia, emotional numbing, and a sense of social alienation. A huge part of the healing process in response to psychological trauma is to reconstruct both a personal narrative and a worldview that incorporates the traumatic event. A religion-based terrorist ideology that incorporates national tradition and even the obligation to avenge a family member can serve this need in the short run, providing a type of psychological first aid that is necessarily short-lived if it ends in the individual becoming a human bomber as a result.

The jihadist ideology thus provides ill-fated psychological help to the trauma victim in the short run as a result of the terror-sponsoring organization's distorted use of Islam to further its political goals. In light of the two wars over the past decade, the continued conflicts, and the current violent counterterrorism measures in Chechnya, Chechens as a whole have suffered widespread psychological traumatization. No individual or family has been untouched by the effects of carpet-bombing of cities, war, violence, and death, and nearly everyone has experienced violence of some sort. Similarly, the wars effected a demographic disaster in Chechnya during this period. Chechnya lost a huge portion of its population to death and refugees fleeing the country¹¹ – with this demographic disaster echoing past deportations, when the

Chechen nation was also decimated by Stalin's destructive deportation policies. The current widespread societal trauma provides fertile ground for some segments of society to embrace a new non-indigenous form of radicalized Islam. It is important to emphasize, however, that this occurs only in conjunction with a segment of society's acceptance of a new interpretation of Islam, one that fits a widespread societal need to respond to the violent, bereaving, and traumatic situations they have recently experienced by subscribing to a newly constructed and violent worldview.¹²

Thus, for those individuals whose family integrity and sense of purpose and belonging have been shattered by the violent deaths of family members, the religious aspect of the jihadist ideology assumes new prominence as it prescribes and signals through new behaviors the belonging to a group and dedication to a meaningful life commitment. Symbols of belonging include pursuing a new lifestyle and wearing clothing that signifies a new life commitment; these are important in filling a vacuum for the trauma victim who is bereaved of key family members and who has lost meaning and direction in the midst of the chaos of war and occupation. Likewise, new prayer rituals and a comforting view of an afterlife expressed in glorified terms for those who die on behalf of God (i.e., martyrs) help to calm the traumatized individual, who often in reaction to the trauma develops an expectation of a foreshortened lifespan and further violence. Similarly, turning to any religious rituals often calms states of bodily arousal and can build upon dissociative phenomena in a manner that makes the psychic numbing common in trauma victims seem like a useful measure versus an obstacle to rebuilding one's life. Turning to religion is a frequent way of comforting oneself in the face of bereavement with the belief that the person mourned lives on in some afterlife. Jihadist ideology makes use of this factor as well, stating that not only will the martyr be reunited with loved ones, but s/he can guarantee the safe passage to paradise for seventy other persons in the family – not a small feat when one feels that life is violent, chaotic, and unpredictable and death lurks everywhere.

Those in our sample as well as all other Chechen suicide terrorists whom we know of were self-recruited in the early stages of their terrorist journey. The path to terrorism nearly always begins with individuals who due to their traumatized psychological state are attracted to radical groups and seek out the jihadist ideology as they grapple with their rather extreme and violent losses. Less clear is what occurs on the side of the organization from the women's first step of joining the terror groups to actually becoming human bombers. We do know that many of the terrorists made clear to their families that in seeking out the Wahhabists, from the

outset they embraced freely and completely the jihadist ideal of becoming martyrs in the fight against the Russians. It was clear that in joining these groups and espousing the jihadist ideology, a new world view was constructed within the “would-be” bombers in which materialism was repudiated; death as a martyr was glorified; terrorist violence was justified as a means of carrying out the jihad, i.e., enacting justice (from their point of view) against the infidel invader; and the afterlife was deemed worthy compensation for sacrificing one’s life. This new worldview was generally accompanied by a total change of mentality and changes in lifestyle (praying frequently, becoming strict in following Muslim codes) and in extreme changes in appearance (the hijab for women; long shirts, shorter pants, and a beard for men). According to our respondents, all of the women in our sample became more religious following their traumatic experiences and spoke increasingly about jihad, paradise, and similar religious themes.

Gender

While some, mainly Russian journalists have written that Chechen women are kidnapped, raped, and/or drugged to encourage them to take part in terror activities, we have found no evidence for this.¹³ On the contrary, we find strong evidence of self-recruitment and strong willingness to martyr oneself on behalf of one’s country and independence from Russia, to enact social justice (in their perspective) for wrongs done to them, and to avenge for the loss of loved ones in their families. We know of only one case where a sister claimed that she was being coerced by her brother into suicide terrorism. She was from a family in which two other sisters very enthusiastically took part in suicide bombings and prior to that other terror missions. This family was split between the mother, who encouraged the children to pursue terrorism, and the father, who was angered by their activities and tried to stop them. The sister turned herself into the Russian authorities, claiming she needed protection from her coercive brother, who had already sent at least four other women as bombers – one who turned back from her mission without reprisal, and three who went very willingly (including two of her sisters). There were complicating factors in the case of some female bombers – wives whose husbands divorced them due to infertility, who perhaps as a result were more free and willing to pursue terrorism (although they still had professional lives open to them), one woman who was seriously ill, and others who were fugitives who could face fates worse than death if caught. Still, in all these cases they retained the main trauma-based motivational core and these other issues appeared to be simply supplemental motivating factors.

As far as we can tell the motivational mechanism for seeking out a terror group generated at first by deep personal traumatization did not differ by gender in any way. Both genders in our sample had suffered violent losses of family members and were overtaken by concerns for restoring social justice, something that a religious ideology often panders to and takes advantage of. Indeed as one author wrote about the Black Widows: their desperation “allows them to be deceived into being devout.”¹⁴

Chechen Terror Networks and Organizations

Marc Sageman studied a select group of global salafist jihadi terrorists and wrote that one of the clearest factors inciting a potential terrorist to action is his or her relationship to a terror network: that recruitment occurs through friendship and familial relations.¹⁵ We do not see this aspect as the main motivational force for Chechens, although it is definitely a factor in who becomes a terrorist. Instead we see deep personal and overwhelming psychological trauma, traumatic bereavement, symptoms of traumatic stress, and subsequent adherence to terrorist ideology as a form of psychological first aid as the main motivational set. We do, however, strongly agree that terrorist recruitment occurs through friendship and familial relations. Indeed, many of the main terrorist leaders (some now dead) married strategically in Chechnya and Ingushetia across regions that ensured that when they needed safe houses and support from the wider familial networks of their wives, they would not be refused, by virtue of the strong Chechen tradition to help family members. In our sample we found that 27 percent (7/26) of the female bombers acted in concert with other family members in carrying out a suicide attack: there were two pairs of sisters present in the Dubrovka Theater takeover; one sister exploded herself on a plane in August 2004, with her sister shortly following her lead in the Beslan school takeover; and a father, son, and daughter detonated themselves in a governmental complex in Grozny. Twenty-seven percent (7/26) of the women in our sample were married or connected by familial ties to Wahhabists prior to becoming involved in terrorism. Proximity to already active terrorists and to terrorist ideology indeed seems to be a strong factor for recruitment.

We lack detailed information as to any military/ guerrilla training the women received, as family members and close acquaintances were generally unaware of these details. It was clear to us that some though not our entire sample spent time in terrorist training camps. From family member interviews we learned that prior to taking part in a terror act some ran away to camps while others left home, ostensibly

to engage in a short buying/trading time in Moscow or elsewhere. We conjecture that training, if it occurred at all, was short, as most female bombers who left home prior to their actions usually left for extremely short periods of time prior – in general, two weeks. Thus while during the time between leaving home and traveling to the terror scene some time may have been spent in training, it is our understanding that very little training is done for Chechen bombers and that once the ideology is adopted it is simply a matter of equipping the woman with a bomb and sending her to her target.

Chechen women are much more emancipated than their Arab sisters. While family structure is still traditional, it is common for Chechen women to attend university and to hold full-time jobs outside their homes.¹⁶ Journalist Barbara Victor writes that perhaps Palestinian female bombers choose suicide terrorism as a means of escaping the tight constraints of traditional roles to become in the short run and in history equal to men.¹⁷ We do not see this as a viable explanation with Chechen female bombers. Indeed, during peacetime many non-traditional roles were open to them. Several in our sample were pursuing higher education and had the possibility of working in professional roles that were disrupted by war. One woman, for instance, was studying history in the university and planned to transfer to law and become a lawyer. However, the last two wars in Chechnya have disrupted most people's plans and hopes for economic or academic success.

In terms of power structure Chechen terror organizations are male-run, with women serving in subservient and traditional roles: cooking, cleaning, bandaging the wounded, nursing, and so on, although three female bombers did break out of these defined roles: one learned to shoot guns and drive, and another set of sisters learned to explode grenades, plant landmines, and shoot guns. Overall, however, Chechen women who join terror groups in Chechnya actually move backwards in some ways. They take on traditional Arab dress which has never been indigenous to Chechnya, including the hijab, and devote themselves to more traditional roles within the groups, except for when they undertake violent missions. Thus it was only when the women endured many traumas and the effects of war obstructed many of life's options that had been open to them previously, that they moved in dress and ideology into fundamentalist roles that did not even exist prior to the war, while at the same moment taking on the perhaps more emancipated roles of warriors.

When considering how Chechen terror organizations function in regard to the role of female bombers, one must keep in mind that terrorism is primarily a psychological

weapon with the goal of spawning widespread terror in a larger audience in order to create changes in public sentiment that may aid the terror organization in achieving its political goals. Palestinians only started to use women as bombers when the checkpoints became increasingly difficult for men to cross, and women initially had more success in arousing less suspicion and undergoing less rigorous searches. This was not the case for Chechens who used women bombers from the start – most likely due to their willingness, availability, high motivational status, and greater emotional impact on their target audience. Chechen terror organizations galvanized world attention by staging a spectacular drama in the Dubrovka Theater House takeover, in which nineteen women dressed in black were shown on a pre-recorded video and in news coverage horrifyingly displaying bombs prominently strapped to their bodies. Likewise, the use of women bombers on planes, trains, and in the subways has implanted in Russians a feeling of all-pervasive danger, potentially presenting anytime and anywhere, from the gentler of genders. Not only does this create a sense of horror in the wider audience, but it has caused some to question what drives Chechen women to such desperate measures.

In terms of organizational structures, we learned that the decision-making, routes to, and motives for becoming a bomber appear to be very similar among male and female terrorists, but that the men are in charge and they give the orders. It was clear from our hostage interviews that the women terrorists in the Moscow siege were clearly in a subservient role to the men. This may have even played out in how it ended. When the Russians stormed the theater the men left the main hall to fight and the women remained behind with the bombs, which they lacked authority to detonate. Whether they were able to make this decision on their own is unknown, as they lost their chance to detonate when the gas overtook them.¹⁸ Likewise whenever Chechen women have traveled to carry out a terror act, they travel with an older woman or appropriate chaperone. In other words, traditional roles of protecting women are still preserved up to the point where she sacrifices herself for the group.

Religious Ideology

Chechen suicide terrorism is bound to Wahhabist terror ideology. All but one female bomber whom we know of had deeply embraced the Wahhabist jihadist ideology, which in Chechnya is used to justify terrorism as a means of enacting revenge and social justice and acting on behalf of a nationalist separatist movement. All were extremely dedicated to their cause and successful in their mission, the exception being a woman who did not carry out her act and who appears to have been motivated by

criminal concerns more than terrorist ideology. This woman is Zarema Mujikhoeva who put her bomb down on a Moscow street and walked away from it. She was later arrested and told many false stories to the police and journalists about coercion in the Chechen groups that she subsequently admitted were inaccurate. Many analysts of Chechen female bombers rely solely on her accounts, despite the fact that they were in the main false and certainly not typical of other women's stories.

In accordance with the global salafi jihadist ideology promoted by al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, and others, Wahhabist terrorist ideology in Chechnya glorifies martyrdom and promotes jihad on behalf of creating a global Muslim caliphate. Prior to the first war in Chechnya this type of Islam was not present. It was imported from Arab regions through al-Qaeda-type terror networks that were active in building mosques and madrassas throughout Chechnya and spreading their form of Islam.¹⁹

The Russian government often claims that the Chechen terror movement exists due to outside funding and forces, but this ignores the very real human rights abuses occurring in Chechnya that continue to fuel terror acts as well as the nationalist separatist dream.²⁰ Likewise, the separatist movement began as a completely secular one, yet when the Chechen separatists were faced with the overwhelming force of the Russian military, the carpet-bombing of Grozny, and other displays of exceptional power, they found themselves increasingly trapped into accepting help from religiously oriented groups that promoted a terrorist ideology. Hence while one sees an ideology that accords with the global salafi jihad, in Chechnya it is focused mainly on recruiting on behalf of a nationalist cause and independence from what is seen as a brutal, repressive regime, although this cause is now spreading throughout the Caucasus region as well.²¹ As the motivations for the bombings derive in the most part from the dynamics of the conflict, and achieving worldwide Muslim domination has never been the Chechen separatist aim, it is not likely that suicide bombings would continue if Chechnya achieved a real negotiated peace with Russia, including withdrawals of troops and federal forces.

Community Support for Female Suicide Terrorism

There is currently very little community support for suicide terrorism in Chechnya, male or female. While the entire Chechen population has been devastated by war and human rights violations, most Chechens still believe in civil society and hope for peace. They do not expect good results from terrorism and condemn the terror groups and bombers. This condemnation cuts across genders and there is neither more nor less support for female or male bombers, as far as we can see. The thirty-

four Chechen close associates and family members of the suicide terrorists were hard-pressed to support their family members and friends. Twenty-one percent (7/34) expressed pity for the suicide terrorists; 23 percent (8/34) expressed not pity but understanding of the suicide terrorists' motives; 44 percent (15/34) felt the bombers were used by terrorist organizations and/or the FSB (formerly the KGB); and 12 percent (4/34) went so far as to criticize the suicide terrorists directly. An overwhelming 59 percent of respondents (20/34, though not all of the 34 were asked specifically about hostages) spontaneously expressed pity for the hostages of suicide terrorists.

In many ways this lack of widespread community support for suicide terrorism is similar to Palestinian society during the time period between the first and second intifadas, but over time a cult of martyrdom that generated posters, videos, songs, and societal glorification grew up in Palestinian society in support of suicide terrorism. It is possible that given conditions of continued human rights violations, the same could occur in Chechnya over time. Those sectors of society that do glorify the bombers have already made a song in memory of the first female bomber, Khava Barayeva, which enjoys popularity among Chechen youth. Hence it appears that while Palestinians and other fundamentalist Muslim groups were loath to use women as bombers and only used them as a last resort when they became an expedient means of crossing increasingly closed borders, the Chechen terror groups found no barriers to using women from the start. This is likely because Chechen women prior to the war already enjoyed a Soviet-type of feminism in terms of equality in education and opportunity to work in many professions. Thus from the outset to volunteer as bombers alongside the men is in keeping with their more egalitarian occupational traditions.

Conclusion

Chechen women have been active from the first as suicide bombers. They do not appear coerced, drugged, or otherwise enticed into these acts. On the contrary, they are self-recruited on the basis of seeking a means of enacting social justice, revenge, and warfare against what they perceive as their nation's enemy. All the women in our sample had been deeply personally traumatized and bereaved by violent deaths in their near families or all about them, and we believe this formed the basis for their self-recruitment into terrorist organizations. Trauma alone, however, would not have motivated them into terrorism: it had to be coupled with a terror promoting ideology espoused by an organization able to equip the women to act. Indeed, all of

the women in our sample were religiously motivated by Wahhabist violent jihadist ideology and were seeking to become martyrs, believing they would be reunited with loved ones in paradise and enjoy the benefits of their family members being admitted to paradise as a result of their act.

While Wahhabists terror groups have managed to radicalize a small segment of Chechen society, the majority of Chechen women (and society as a whole) does not currently support suicide terrorism. They support civil society and want to see an end to the conflicts and violent counterterrorism operations, valuing these as much higher goals than achieving national independence. Nevertheless, an extremely small group of radicalized Chechens continues to be a severe threat. As Ramzan Kadyrov, vice premier of the Russian-backed Chechen government said in his interview to Chechen TV on May 11, 2005, Chechen women are the most dangerous for national security because they have carried out the most risky operations. If the current trend continues, Chechen female bombers will continue to be a grave threat to Russian national security.

Notes

- 1 We have classified suicide bombers as anyone who goes so far as to strap on a bomb or drive a vehicle filled with explosives to a target, or who otherwise attempts to detonate an explosive device on an airplane or elsewhere with the aim of dying to kill, irrespective of whether or not the bomber actually died in the attack or was successful in detonating – as that is often not within the bomber’s control. We take the point of strapping on a bomb or other type of improvised explosive device or driving a vehicle loaded with explosives to a target as enough evidence of seriousness of the intent to commit suicide, and we see the end result, which is often out of the hands of the bomber, as less meaningful than the intent implied by these actions.
- 2 These numbers are based upon our database of attacks attributed to Chechens as of late June 2005. Quantifying the exact number of attacks, gender of bombers, and so on is difficult as reports vary by government and news source and the gender of accomplished bombers is not always evident after an attack. In every case we have used the more conservative estimates, as our experience with journalists reporting in and about Chechnya is that they have difficulty getting reports and sometimes rely on rumors. See table 1 for a complete account regarding suicide terror acts attributed to Chechens.
- 3 See Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), in which he discusses the concept of a psychological autopsy following a normal suicide. Shneidman also coined the term “psyche ache,” psychic pain referring to deeply felt

emotions that are painful to the individual. He argued that the best predictor of an individual's propensity to suicide is when emotional pain is experienced as overwhelming and inescapable.

- 4 See Scott Atran, "Genesis of Suicide Terrorism," *Science* 200 (March 2003): 534; also Scott Atran, "Mishandling Suicide Terrorism," *The Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2004): 67-90.
- 5 See Anne Speckhard & Khapta Akhmedova, "Mechanisms of Generating Suicide Terrorism: Trauma and Bereavement as Psychological Vulnerabilities in Human Security – The Chechen Case," in Jill Donnelly, ed. NATO Science Series, Brussels, 2004 for an additional discussion of this factor in regard to Chechens; Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, "Talking to Terrorists," *Journal of Psychohistory* (Fall 2005); and Anne Speckhard, "Understanding Suicide Terrorism: Countering Human Bombs and their Senders," in *Topics in Terrorism: Toward a Transatlantic Consensus on the Nature of the Threat*, vol. I, eds. Jason S. Purcell and Joshua D. Weintraub, Atlantic Council Publication, 2005.
- 6 Wahhabism is a non-indigenous form of Islam originating in the Arabian Peninsula in the eighteenth century from a reformist movement begun by Mohamed ibn abd al Wahhab (1703-1791) to return Islam to its original purity. Wahhab based his ideas on a strict interpretation of the Qur'an and his movement had as its central tenant the oneness of God. He condemned idolatry in all forms as well as anything that could possibly be interpreted as an intermediary to God, ordering the destruction of sacred tombs, shrines, and so on. He also not only allowed, but also called for waging war on fellow Muslims who had reverted back to a state of jahiliyyah – the state of barbarism and ignorance that prevailed in the Arabian Peninsula prior to Mohammed's revelations. Wahhabism as a belief system, although not in itself necessarily militant, is the subset of Islam that has been used to inform the terrorist ideology, which lies at the base of the current worldwide salafi jihad. Wahhabism, interpreted in its most radical and militant type, also forms the ideological underpinning of Chechen terror groups. While the label Wahhabism denotes a totally other and neutral meaning in the Gulf States and elsewhere in the world, it should be understood that in Russia, Chechnya, the Caucuses, and the other former Soviet Union republics this label denotes an ultra-militant form of Islam and refers to militant religious groups that promote jihad and terrorism – so much so that in Russian the word "wahhabist" has become synonymous with terrorist. For the purposes of this paper we adhere to the Russian meaning of the word as it is understood in the Chechen context: we refer to Wahhabists in Chechnya as those groups that have formed according to a militant interpretation of Islam that promotes jihad and allows for and promotes terrorism. By doing so we mean no offense to Wahhabists who practice Islam peacefully in other parts of the world (or in Chechnya for that matter), and we fully acknowledge that this term has an entirely other, peaceful meaning outside of Chechnya.
- 7 See Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, "The New Chechen Jihad: Militant Wahhabism as a Radical Movement and a Source of Suicide Terrorism in Post-War

- Chechen Society," *Democracy and Security* 2 (2006): 1-53; Anne Speckhard and Khapta Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 5 (2006): 1-65; and Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "Mechanisms of Generating Suicide Terrorism."
- 8 K. Akhmedova, "Fanatism and Revenge Idea of Civilians who had PTSD," *Social and Clinical Psychiatry* 12, no. 3 (2003): 24-32. See also Anne Speckhard, Ken Reidy, Val Vanrompay, and Beatrice Jacuch, "Taking on the Persona of a Suicide Bomber: A Thought Experiment," unpublished research paper, 2005, for a discussion of revenge seeking in normal subjects taking part in a fantasy exercise.
 - 9 R. Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
 - 10 According to the American Psychiatric Association, dissociation is often a psychological symptom following deep traumatization. The essential feature of dissociation is "a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity or perception of the environment," American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed., Washington, DC, 1994. In the case of suicide terrorism, this means an emotional barrier is unconsciously erected, walling off the negative emotions generated by choosing to die in this manner and may even include compartmentalizing the event from one's ambitions and daily life. One Palestinian bomber, for example, when planning his attack, suggested that he could not carry a bomb until after his university exams – suggesting that while on the one hand he acknowledged that he was going to his death, he was able separate this reality so completely from his mind that he still felt that the need to complete his exams prior to going to explode himself. For a more complete discussion of this concept in relation to suicide terrorism see Speckhard and Akhmedova, "Mechanisms of Generating Suicide Terrorism" for an additional discussion of this factor in regard to Chechens; Speckhard and Akhmedova, "Talking to Terrorists"; Speckhard, "Understanding Suicide Terrorism: Countering Human Bombs and their Senders"; and Speckhard, Reidy, Vanrompay, and Jacuch, "Taking on the Persona of a Suicide Bomber: A Thought Experiment."
 - 11 See John Reuter, "Chechnya's Suicide Bombers: Desperate, Devout, or Deceived?" The American Committee for Peace in Chechnya publication, 2004, p. 21: "Having witnessed the almost total obliteration of their country in the past decade, the Chechen people have suffered immeasurably. This tiny mountain nation has endured an apocalyptic demographic crisis, with nearly **180,000 Chechens killed and over 300,000 displaced**. These unfathomable numbers mean that one in two Chechens were either killed or driven from their homes in the past ten years. Moreover, Chechnya's cities have been reduced to rubble and the extent of the environmental catastrophe is yet to be fully understood. Every single person alive today in Chechnya has been deeply scarred by the bloody conflict raging in their midst." <http://www.peaceinchechnya.org/reports/>

- SuicideReport/, accessed June 1, 2005,
- 12 See Nichole Argo, "Culture, Society and Martyrdom," unpublished research paper, 2004; Speckhard, "Understanding Suicide Terrorism: Countering Human Bombs and their Senders."
 - 13 Zarema Mujikhoeva, the only bomber who did not carry out her act at the last moment, began the rumor of Black Fatima, an older woman that she claimed followed behind the female bombers to make sure they detonated and who was said to be able to detonate by remote. Mujikhoeva later discredited herself and admitted to lying, which was obvious from the fact that if Black Fatima actually existed it's very unlikely Mujikhoeva would have been able to put her bomb-filled rucksack down and walk away from it without it being detonated by remote by this phantom figure.
 - 14 See Reuter, "Chechnya's Suicide Bombers: Desperate, Devout, or Deceived?": "The primary characteristic that differentiates the majority of Chechen suicide attackers from other suicide attackers around the world is the prominent role desperation and grief play in precipitating vulnerability to suicide terrorism. In most cases, all that is missing is a skilled recruiter that can operationalize these emotions and turn disenchanting Chechen women into radical shakhidi. As it turns out, Chechen suicide bombers are not wholly desperate, devout, or deceived, but instead they are desperate which allows them to be deceived into being devout," p. 19.
 - 15 See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Also see J. Post, E. Sprinzak, and L. Denny, "The Terrorists in Their Own Words: Interviews with 35 Incarcerated Middle Eastern Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 1 (2003): 171-84 for a discussion of group dynamics and identity needs as motivational factors for joining and staying in a terror cell.
 - 16 Within their homes Chechen women, like most women in the world, still do the majority of housework, cleaning, cooking, and childrearing tasks.
 - 17 See Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (Rodale Books, 2003). Speckhard interviewed many of the same families Victor interviewed and received a very different explanation. Hence while it's possible that feminist concerns – especially blocked social roles, the need to hide pregnancies or affairs – can be operational, Speckhard found these Palestinian women to have other issues than feminism as their main motivations.
 - 18 See Anne Speckhard, "Soldiers for God: A Study of the Suicide Terrorists in the Moscow Hostage Taking Siege," in *The Roots of Terrorism: Contemporary Trends and Traditional Analysis*, ed. Oliver McTernan, NATO Science Series, Brussels, 2004; Anne Speckhard, Nadejda Tarabrina, Valery Krasnov, and Khapta Akhmedova, "Research Note: Observations of Suicidal Terrorists in Action," in *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 2 (2004): 305-27; Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism"; A. Speckhard, N. Tarabrina, V. Krasnov, and N. Mufel, "Posttraumatic and

Acute Stress Responses in Hostages held by Suicidal Terrorists in the Takeover of a Moscow Theater," *Traumatology* 11, no. 1 (2005); A. Speckhard, N. Tarabrina, V. Krasnov, and N. Mufel, "Stockholm Effects and Psychological Responses to Captivity in Hostages Held by Suicidal Terrorists," *Traumatology*: 11, no. 2 (2005, reprinted in S. Wessely & V. Krasnov, eds., *Psychological Responses to the New Terrorism: A NATO Russia Dialogue*, 2005, IOS Press). It should also be noted that rumours abound about this terror event. Some claim that since the male leadership of the terrorists in the Dubrovka Theater were calling on mobile phones to associates outside of the theater they, as well as the women, may have been waiting for orders about when to detonate the bombs, and lacking this outside order, the women failed to detonate. In either case the women were submissive to male orders.

- 19 Many of these madrassas targeted and preyed upon war widows and their young children, inviting the children to study for free, knowing that being fatherless because of the war they would be more receptive to the jihadist ideology. Nowadays these mosques and madrassas have been shut down by the Russians. See Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, "The New Chechen Jihad: Militant Wahhabism as a Radical Movement and a Source of Suicide Terrorism in Post-War Chechen Society," *Democracy and Security* 2 (2006): 1-53.
- 20 Dmitri Trenin, Aleksei Malashenko, and Anatol Lieven, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004); and Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism Studies in Conflict and Terrorism."
- 21 See Speckhard and Akhmedova, "The New Chechen Jihad: Militant Wahhabism as a Radical Movement and a Source of Suicide Terrorism in Post-War Chechen Society."