

# Introduction

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**Yoram Schweitzer**

Over the last few years, women suicide bombers have earned the dubious distinction of appearing more newsworthy than their male counterparts. While investigative reporting on a male suicide bomber is often extensive, coverage of a female suicide bomber seems to result in more widespread media exposure. This may serve as another expression of the prevailing belief that women, unlike men, must have unique and excessively abnormal reasons for committing what is deemed as a distinctly non-feminine act.

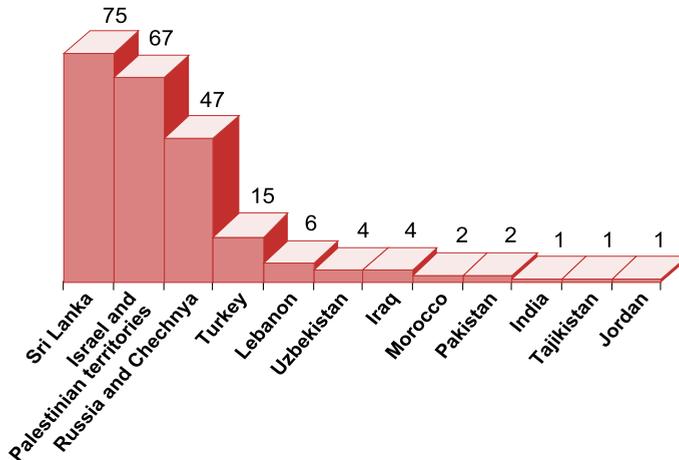
The media's fascination with women suicide bombers is a curious phenomenon. In our contemporary era, one might not expect the excessive attention to female suicide bombers, certainly not when it is not an isolated phenomenon. Moreover, the very participation of women in terrorism and even the phenomenon of women suicide bombers is hardly a recent development. Women have taken part in terror attacks since at least the nineteenth century, and have played a role in the modern terrorism that has gained momentum since the 1960s. Prominent examples include the female participants in the campaign waged by the FLN during the Battle of Algiers in the late 1950s and early 1960s; the terror campaigns of the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany and the Italian Red Brigades in Italy from the 1970s to the mid-1980s; and the Palestinian hijackings at the end of the 1960s to the mid-1970s.

Nor is female participation in suicide bombings a new phenomenon, as women have numbered among its ranks almost since it first appeared in the Middle East in the early 1980s. The first female suicide bomber, Sana Mekhaidali, was sent by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP/PPS) in 1985 and successfully targeted an IDF convoy in Lebanon, killing five soldiers. Dubbed "the bride of the south," her act was followed by five other women dispatched in Lebanon, all acting on behalf of a secular pro-Syrian agenda. Subsequent decades witnessed the spread of female suicide bombers to other areas around the globe. Groups from Sri Lanka, the Palestinian territories, Chechnya, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Iraq, and elsewhere emulated the Lebanese example and operated female suicide bombers

along with their male counterparts. Recent examples of women suicide bombers include a member of TIKKO (the Turkish Workers Villagers Independent Army) who detonated her bomb at the entrance to a mosque in April 2006; a Sri Lankan woman who blew herself up near a Colombian army base on April 25, 2006, wounding the commander of the Sri Lankan armed forces; and Sonja B, a German convert to Islam who was seized in Germany on June 2, 2006 to foil her planned suicide attack in Iraq.

Between 1985 and 2006, there have been more than 220 women suicide bombers (figure 1), representing nearly 15 percent of the overall number of actual suicide bombers around the world and those intercepted in the final stages before the attack. A suicide attack is defined here as a violent, politically motivated action intended consciously and with prior intent – even if thwarted in its final stages – by one or more individuals who kills him/herself in the course of the operation together with his/her chosen target. The guaranteed and preplanned death of the perpetrator is a prerequisite for the operation’s success.<sup>1</sup> The enlistment of women from Belgium, India, Iraq, Turkey, and the West Bank territories for suicide attacks in 2006 indicates that their role continues, and may in fact represent a growing phenomenon.

Yet notwithstanding the familiarity of the phenomenon – or at the very least, its lack of singularity – there seems to have been a disproportionately large interest in women suicide bombers, and the question is why. Certainly the dominance of



**Figure 1.** Female Suicide Bombers, by Targeted Areas, 1985-2006

**Source:** Database compiled by Yoram Schweitzer

traditional gender stereotypes is a factor: despite whatever social and political advances they have made, women are still overwhelmingly regarded as the gentler sex, whose innate maternal nature makes them far less likely candidates for suicide bombers. Their role in the suicide bombing arena has been characterized as shocking, if not outright inconceivable. Since in many cultures women are perceived as the gentle and naive creators of human life, their participation in acts of carnage and devastating pain has aroused a mixture of surprise and repulsion and elevated the level of public interest.

The involvement of women in suicide bombings spawns a host of related questions. Are women's motivations and performances different in comparison to those of their male counterparts? Are they more (or less) determined and dedicated to the cause? Are they more radical or extreme than the men in their perceptions towards the path their struggle has taken? Are they more emotional about it? Do they need a longer or shorter period of preparation for the mission? Are they involved in the operational decision-making process? Do they aspire to be more involved in determining the strategy of their mission?

Examination reveals that despite their high profile, women play a marginal role in their organizations, both numerically and in the corporate structure (even if in some areas such as Turkey they comprised around 40 percent of all the suicide bombers, in Sri Lanka, 20-25 percent, and in Chechnya, 43 percent). They are definitely not the leaders in their organizations, but serve rather as pawns and sacrificial lambs. They are not responsible for the planning of the operations and are actually dispatched to the missions with barely a say as to their targets, the timing of the bombing, and the way the operation should be conducted. For the most part they have not otherwise been trained as fighters, and a suicide mission in itself requires little investment in job training, in terms of either time or money. Indeed, for many of the women, the contribution of a suicide mission to their national or religious struggle is precisely that: a form of employment in the male-dominated domain of suicide bombing.

Furthermore, there are operational exigencies that have dictated the use of female suicide bombers, despite religious or cultural constraints. Women arouse less suspicion and are better able to clear checkpoints and other security obstacles. In addition, they do not have to undergo special training or possess specialized combat skills, and therefore they offer an efficient use of human resources. Moreover, the fact that a woman attracts greater media attention is an asset in and of itself to the organization that sent her. The organization and its particular cause or grievances will almost automatically enjoy greater exposure, which in large measure is an

immediate aim of the bombing itself. In turn, morale and enthusiasm among the rank and file are heightened

These parameters are illustrated by a Fatah operative in charge of a terrorist cell who dispatched two female suicide bombers. He stated that he eventually sent one of them on her mission after rejecting her request several times previously because it was nearly impossible to have a man bypass security arrangements. In the second case, the woman worked with a male partner. As such, she served as both a human bomb and as a cover, lending the two suicide bombers an innocent appearance of a romantic couple. The handler, however, also mentioned his propaganda considerations, knowing his choice of bombers would demonstrate to the Arab world and the world at large that even women are active participants in the Palestinian struggle aspect. Not only did the women arouse the usual excessive media attention, but he noted that there was even a *katsida*, a traditional Islamic ballad, written by a Saudi prince in their honor.<sup>2</sup>

And finally, the question arises: how much is this gender-related phenomenon in fact a function of gender-related issues? More specifically, to what extent is feminism on the agenda of the women themselves or those who send them? Are these bombers in fact dying for equality? Alternatively, is this feminist agenda primarily a Western prism artificially imposed on a non-Western context?

The questions are complicated and multi-dimensional. Female suicide bombers appear almost exclusively in societies that are heavily traditionalist and conservative, where women lack equal rights and their status in society is much lower than that of their male counterparts. In some of the dispatching organizations such as the Kurdish PKK and the Sri Lankan LTTE, leaders promised that women participating in such operations would pave the way for other women to enjoy an equal status and to be emancipated. Although women were already integrated into the army, they did not earn commanding positions, and hence the promise – ultimately empty – of gender advancement for their female colleagues if they volunteered for suicide operations. Thus, those sending the women may be exploiting the modern cry for emancipation of women: proving that women are equally eligible to die alongside men for a nationalist or religious cause ostensibly indicates an equivalency of value.

How much have the women themselves seen their actions as acts of feminism, designed to advance the cause of women's equality in their societies? While operators may have used the bombings to proclaim their would-be progressive gender outlook, do women themselves see their act as their contribution to the feminist cause? Are there feminist overtones, beyond the nationalist / religious motivations? Evidence

suggests that if the women themselves attribute any feminist goals to their actions, this is a rationale imposed after the fact. Far from the primary catalyst that launched them on their mission, advancing gender interests is sometimes an imported cause meant to redeem – if not glorify – the aberration of a female suicide bomber.

Thus, along with a smart utilization of human resources, women's participation in suicide bombings has been used as a propaganda tool by their organizations and served the dispatchers' drive to project an image of participation by all segments of their respective societies in the ethno-national and/or religious struggles. Yet despite the rhetoric and the temporary honor these women enjoy in implementing their tasks, they have not succeeded in promoting any of the egalitarian agendas that hovered around them. Therefore, the concept of dying for equality translates into negative gains on both levels: it was neither achieved nor apparently was it the main purpose of the volunteering participants, albeit it was at times explicitly or implicitly attributed to the deed by those who sent them.

The question of a feminist agenda is a thread that runs throughout the articles below, which deal with women suicide bombers in three conflict arenas: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Russian-Chechen conflict, and the Sri Lankan-Tamil conflict. The collection of articles was launched following a seminar at the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies in May 2005, "Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?" Some of the articles are based on the authors' presentations at the seminar.

Palestinian female suicide bombers are the subject of the first four articles. Not only do they command the interest of analysts in this part of the world, but Israel's media openness has allowed interviews with many unsuccessful women bombers, which provides a unique channel of information. In the opening article, Mira Tzoreff studies the phenomenon of suicide bombing within the context of the Palestinian social agenda, and suggests that suicide bombing may represent a distorted effort by women who differed from the normative Palestinian woman to achieve a legitimate status of their own. In the second article, Yoram Schweitzer cautions against relying on one-time media exposure or quick and short interviews, where packaged answers are spouted by prepared interviewees. Based on his interviews with several dozen jailed women, Schweitzer also argues that while feminist mantras were chanted loudly and proudly after each event by external supporters, they were hardly evident from the beginning. Thus at issue here is the questionable presence of authentic feminist motives, as well as the effort by both the Western press and by the Arab media to use these women as tools for the purposes of their own propaganda.

This divide between Western and Arab portraits of the women and their feminist contribution is documented by Avi Issacharoff. And yet, as Rivka Yadlin shows in the fourth article, what constitutes feminism is in itself open to cultural debate, with many Muslim women rejecting the Western feminist recipe and choosing their own version of feminist expression.

The three other articles in this monograph explore additional aspects within the phenomenon of suicide bombing. Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova study the Black Widows, the suicide bombers who have earned a prominent, albeit hierarchically subordinate, role in Chechnya's terrorism campaign. The fact that their conflict is primarily a nationalist one, rather than a religious one, has certain policy ramifications. In his article on Tamil women suicide bombers, Arjuna Gunawardena suggests that once having become combatants the female Black Tigers are already emancipated to a certain extent, and therefore do not need to die to achieve equality in this respect. However, the women's role in the Tamil national struggle has not bequeathed them with a higher status in the Tamil society. In the final article, Maria Alvanou urges the study of female suicide terrorism through the lens of criminology, which can join gender studies and yield important insight on this phenomenon.

According to conventional wisdom, women as the bearers and nurturers of life lack the natural inclination to carry out violent acts resulting in death. Recent decades have proven that under certain circumstances women can behave and fight in as deadly a fashion as their male counterparts. Whether driven by society, exploited by organizations, or obeying or defying patriarchal norms, the fact remains they are no longer only the mothers of those who dare to give up life killing others; now some, and not even in marginal numbers only, have become emissaries of death.

## Notes

- 1 Based on the definition in Yoram Schweitzer and Shaul Shay, *The Globalization of Terror: The Challenge of Al-Qaida and the Response of the International Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), pp. 154-55.
- 2 Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with A.M., October 26, 2005.