Female Suicide Bombers: Coerced or Committed?

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Abstract

The divide of the Islamic faith into Sunni and Shia sects, is a serious intercultural conflict that must be addressed. Islamic history can help provide answers to questions in politics and life in the Arab world today. Along with the divide in the Islamic faith, topics will focus on understanding the cultural cohesion provided by the religion of Islam, the Arabic language, and Arab history. In addition to culture, examination of how the Sunni-Shia conflict emerged and how it has persisted throughout history will be evaluated. This historical conflict is a major influence in the rise of Islamic Terrorism and oppression by political leaders in the region today. An examination of these topics will help explain the culture in the Middle East, interaction between Arabs, interaction between the sects of Islam, and how cultural divisions influence those interactions today.

Key words: Prophet Muhammad, Sunni, Shia, Islam, Abu Bakr, Ali, Terrorism, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Intercultural Conflict, Khalifate

"Terrorism is a synthesis of war and theater--a dramatization of the most proscribed type of violence—that which is perpetrated on innocent victims—played before an audience in the hope of creating a mood of fear, for political purpose." –Martha Crenshaw (Kleinberg, 2014)

"I have to tell the world that if they do not defend us, then we have to defend ourselves with the only thing we have, our bodies. Our bodies are the only fighting means at our disposal" –Hiba, 28 year old, mother of five, suicide bomber trainee (Zedalis, 2004)

"A Muslim woman is a female Jihad warrior always and everywhere. She is a female Jihad warrior who wages Jihad by means of funding Jihad. She wages Jihad by means of waiting for her Jihad warrior husband, and when she educates her children to that which Allah loves. She wages jihad when she supports Jihad when she calls for jihad in word, deed, belief, and prayer." -Umm Badr, "Obstacles in the Path of the Jihad Warrior Woman," (Knop, 2007)

Introduction

The method of suicide terrorism has been a shocking process to most liberal Western onlookers and female attackers exacerbate this psychological effect. Terrorists use suicide bombers because they are low cost, as opposed to buying arms, require low technology, and are a low risk weapon. They also require little training, leave no trace behind, have the element of surprise, have accessibility to targeted populations as well as soft targets, and strike fear into the general population (Zedalis, 2004). The first successful female suicide bomber was a 17-year-old

Lebanese girl named Sana Mahaydali, also known as, *The Bride of the South*. In 1985, the Syrian Socialist Party (SSNP/PPS), a pro-Syrian Lebanese organization, sent Sana to blow herself up near some vehicles carrying Israeli soldiers in Lebanon (Knop, 2007). After this successful attack, the use of female suicide bombers began to grow and spread to other terrorist organizations. This act of using women seemed to contradict the idea of what a terrorist is. Most people still assume that women would not kill in such a brutal and indiscriminate way targeting innocent people. This is why there is usually a public outcry of horror against the concept of women terrorists, as well as the use of children. Throughout history, even when women have played a relatively minor role in terrorist organizations, what is generally not realized is the extent to which women are involved in terrorism (Knop, 2007). Women are intertwined in terrorist organizations even when the world thinks that they are invisible; they are actively playing an essential role in the short and long term survival of terrorist organizations.

Involvement

Female suicide bombers are becoming more involved with terrorist organizations and more so in Jihadist or religious-fundamentalist groups. From 1985-2006, female suicide attacks accounted for some 15% of all suicide attacks (Davis, 2013). Attempts have been made to profile female suicide bombers in the hope that common threads in their characteristics and motivations can be found. It is very difficult to profile female suicide bombers or female facilitators and supporters who are coming from every educational, religious, social, and personal background, but female terrorists share more than the use of a certain fighting strategy, they share the fanaticism that fuels terrorism. Female suicide bombing occurs in patriarchal societies from which these women originate. One must consider taking how deeply rooted the values are that separate the female roles from that of the male (Knop, 2007). According to Holt (2010), "Although women took part in battles at the time of the Prophet Mohammad, their participation was gradually restricted" (p. 372). The basic gender roles of men being dominant and women being submissive/inferior have carried through into terrorism until recently. Female terrorism is growing because women are motivated to participate in political violence and organizations are facing stronger incentives to recruit female operatives. Palestinian women have historically been seen as the most liberated women in an Arab society, and some may interpret their participation in terrorism as a way of gaining a title and power (Copeland, 2002). Terrorist, or insurgent groups, frequently experience pressure on their recruiting base which spurs the need to expand that base to sustain the group's ranks. However, this usually happens after the conflict has been ongoing for some time. For example, while the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) formed around 1976, women were not employed as suicide bombers until 1994. The PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party) also waited approximately 18 years before employing women as suicide bombers. On average, terrorist groups that use suicide terrorism as a tactic wait roughly 13.5 years before employing women (Davis, 2013). As Cronin (2009) stated, "The group was particularly well-known for being among the first to use women as suicide attackers, openly arguing that the female sex is weaker thus more expendable" (p. 128).

At the individual level, women are motivated to participate in terrorism for political and personal reasons. For example, while most of the Palestinian women deal with organizational aspects of their terrorist groups, such as helping out with logistics in the West Bank and running charitable societies as a cover for PIJ (Palestine Islamic Jihad) activities, some of them have also been directly involved in supporting and funding its terrorist activities. A cell of women who

transferred money from Damascus to the West Bank was uncovered by the Israeli Security Agency in November 2006. All those detained were sisters or wives of *Shaheeds* (martyrs) and PIJ detainees. Also, fund-raising activities by women in other Middle Eastern-based groups such as the PKK and the Mujahadeen-e-Khalq (MEK) in North America suggest that women's roles have the potential to be more expansive both within and outside of the Palestinian setting (Davis, 2013). Female terrorists are motivated by many of the same reasons as men, but the gender-based oppression they face creates additional motivation. Terrorist attacks occur in the public realm from which women are otherwise excluded because of the construct of their patriarchal societies. Female terrorists are thus able to pursue opportunities other than the limited ones available in traditional societies. This suggests that female subservience is linked to female participation in terrorism. As agents of violence, women are no longer defined according to their gendered roles. In this case participation in terrorism is a means through which women can pursue a misinterpreted understanding of female liberation or emancipation. As a result of the absence of other role models, the radical women do believe gender equality means being as violent as their male counterparts. Especially in Palestinian society, the only way to become a female hero is by carrying out a suicide attack (Knop, 2007).

Motivations

Suicide bombers (male or female) often articulate a sense of personal, sacred sacrifice toward their mission. Resentment and self-righteousness are often considered to be the underlying motivators for engaging in terrorism (Patkin, 2004). Distinguishing themselves as victims, the terrorists enhance a hypersensitive awareness of snubs and humiliations inflicted upon themselves as part of elite heroically struggling to right the injustices of an unfair world. Terrorists share several characteristics: "oversimplification of issues, frustration about an inability to change society, a sense of self-righteousness, a Utopian belief in the world, a feeling of social isolation, a need to assert his/her own existence, and a cold-blooded willingness to kill" (Patkin, 2004, p. 80). The Bush administration briefly tried to get journalists to use the term *homicide bombing,* but it did not gain currency (Patkin, 2004). Suicide bombers are not suffering from clinical depression or emotional difficulties; they perceive themselves as fulfilling a holy mission that will make them martyrs (Patkin, 2004). The action is not "suicide" but rather "martyrdom" and thus does not violate religious prohibitions against killing oneself (Patkin, 2004, p.79). Religious terrorists believe divine authority sanctions their goals and activities. Martyrdom, the voluntary acceptance of death as a demonstration of religious truth, is a concept central to Islam. Suicide bombers view themselves as martyrs fighting a *jihad* against their heretic, apostate opponents. Terrorist groups include women in their ranks for tactical and strategic reasons as well. Cindy Ness argues in her widely cited article "In the Name of the Cause: Women's Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism" that the ". . . introduction of women and girls into combat generally came about in response to logistical demands: the mounting number of casualties, the intensified crackdowns by government, and the ability to escape detection more easily than men" (p. 357) In the Palestinian case, tactical and strategic advantages presented by women led to their inclusion in suicide terrorism (Davis, 2013).

While in training, recruits are influenced that suicide is the shortest path to heaven. If their joy at achieving paradise ever wavers, the assistants who constantly accompany the trainees remind them of the pain associated with sickness and old age encourages them to re-enact previous terror operations, and assure them that death will be swift and painless and that the

doors to paradise beckon (Patkin, 2004). In actuality, fear of impending death is not an issue for recruits as much as awe. The prospective martyr expects to attain paradise imminently and is anxious that something might go wrong and keep them from the presence of Allah. Heaven is conceptualized as a place of perfection, a lovely garden containing trees, fruit orchards, animals, exquisite foods, beverages, clothing and scenery (Stem, 2003). One lives in a beautiful home with a pleasant smell of perfume, with servants attending to one's every need, and family members from this life and the next close at hand (Anonymous, 2002). Male martyrs achieve atonement for all of his sins with the first drop of bloodshed, and ten minutes after martyrdom, weds 72 beautiful dark-eyed virgins whose home is in heaven. The 72 virgins are actually the reward for every believer admitted to paradise, according to mainstream Islamic theology, and the pleasures they offer are not sensual, but that does not make the prospect any less appealing to teenage boys (Patkin, 2004). On the designated day, he completes a ritual bath, puts on clean clothes and tucks a Koran in the left breast pocket above the heart, prays, and straps on the explosives or picks up the briefcase or bag containing the bomb. The trainer wishes him success so that he will attain paradise and the trainee responds that they will meet in paradise. As he pushes the detonator, he says *"Allahu akbar"* which translates as, "Allah is great. All praise to him" (Hassan, 2001, para. 42). Afterwards, the sponsoring organization pays for the *shaheed's* memorial service and burial as well as making financial contributions to the bomber's family (Reuter, 2004). For women, it is still the martyrdom that pushes them to commit to suicide bombings, but women are more often found to articulate private concerns such as using terrorism as a means to protect their families, homes and communities (Caiazza, 2001). Their rewards are the same as the men's except for the seventy-two virgins. In this aspect women remain with the husband that they had when they died or they will marry one in paradise (Cook, 2005).

Idyllic Female Bomber

Women who join terrorist groups tend to be older and better educated than their male counterparts. And yet, perceptions of women's motivations for terrorism continue to be painted by the notion that women are emotional and irrational, perhaps even driven by hormonal imbalances; rarely have their actions been interpreted as intelligent, rational decisions. As Talbot (2001) reported, "The average depiction of women terrorists draws on concepts that they are (a) extremist feminists; (b) only bound into terrorism via a relationship with a man; (c) only acting in supporting roles within terrorist organizations; (d) mentally inept; (e) unfeminine in some way; or any combination of the above. She is seldom the highly reasoned, non-emotive, political animal that is the picture of her male counterpart; in short, she rarely escapes her sex" (Patkin, 2004, p. 82). When women are asked about their terrorist activity, they do not perceive their involvement as passive; they regard themselves as empowered political actors, not as auxiliaries to their more self-aware male counterparts (Talbot, 2001).

The Shaheeda

Until recently, female suicide bombers were extremely rare among Muslims, and some fundamentalist Islamic terror groups do not even permit women to take part in terrorist activities, particularly not suicide operations. Historically, Hamas and Islamic Jihad were adamant that women should not participate in violent demonstrations, but rather remain at home in their established roles as mothers and homemakers, donning traditional dress and head coverings

(Victor, 2003). But in 2002, Yasser Arafat gave his Army of Roses speech in which he called upon women to join as equals in the struggle against Israel, coining the term *shaheeda,* the feminine of the Arabic word for martyr (Victor, 2003). That same afternoon, Wafa Idris became the first female Palestinian suicide bomber (Reynolds, 2002; Tiemey, 2002). Soon afterward, Al-Aqsa Brigades actively began recruiting women as suicide bombers, opening a woman's suicide unit in Idris' honor (Victor, 2003). The Palestinian Authority immediately turned Wafa Idris, into a heroine, holding a demonstration in her honor with young girls carrying posters illustrated with her picture and eulogizing her with great pride (Marcus, 2003). Music videos arose and illustrated morphed images of a woman singing to a uniformed female warrior proclaiming her willingness to die as a martyr. A concert honoring Idris has been broadcast repeatedly, and summer camps for Palestinian girls were named to honor Idris and other female suicide bombers (Marcus, 2003). Palestinian women are recruited by men (brothers, uncles, teachers or religious leaders) and not by other women, although young girls now look to the mediated images of the first female suicide bombers as role models (Victor, 2003). The men persuade the female recruits that the most valuable thing they can do with their life is to end it; a suicide bombing often provides a dual function as an attack against Israel and a redemption of personal or family honor, which is a highly salient value in Palestinian culture (Victor, 2003).

In Iraq, women's motivations for joining the fight are the subject of mostly speculation. One explanation is that women have been raped and encouraged to join the *jihad*. On February 3, 2009, Iraqi security forces arrested an alleged female member of Ansar al-Sunna, an Al Qaeda–affiliated group (Davis, 2013). Authorities suspected her of having trained around eighty female suicide bombers and sending at least twenty-eight to carry out attacks. If true, female suicide bombers trained by this recruiter would account for approximately forty-four percent of the attacks carried out by women in Iraq. The recruiter allegedly had women raped by members of the terrorist/insurgent group; after the rape, she approached the women and encouraged them to join the *jihad* in order to redeem themselves from the dishonoring act. While this is the first and only indication of a woman acting as a recruiter for Al Qaeda or affiliates in Iraq, rape has been used as a recruiting tool in other countries, such as Sri Lanka (Davis, 2013). Female suicide bombers in Iraq appear to be employed for many of the same reasons that women are employed in other conflicts. Women were used to cross checkpoints, as they can do so relatively unsearched; despite the Lioness program[1], the majority of checkpoints remain manned in a literal sense, possibly resulting in a lack of proper searching of women. They were used to ease recruitment pressures and for their ability to strike targets (tactical surprise) (Davis, 2013).

Taken from Davis (2013) studies, Miranda Alison, Associate Professor in Politics and International Studies at University of Warwick, claims:

"Existing research suggests that female combatants are often perceived as a necessary but *temporary* aberration in a time of national crisis and need, rather than as representative of a fundamental societal change in gender roles. Their postwar re-marginalization also suggests that they figure as a threat to the nation's and the state's ideological security and cohesion and the existing political culture, through their destabilization of gender roles. While this can be tolerated and is often necessary in a time of crisis, it is less acceptable in a post-conflict *normal society*

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[1] The Lioness program began in approximately 2004; female Marines were stationed at tactical control points primarily to stop the insurgents from using women smugglers to gain funds or weapons to support their efforts. Since 2004, the number of attacks perpetrated by women has increased significantly per year. Available at http://www.military.com/features/0,15240,109917,00.html, http:// www.marine-corpsnews. com/2009/03/lioness program pride of the c.htm (accessed 14 December 2011).

context, indicating again the ambiguous and uneasy nature of the role of the female combatant" (p. 287).

Exploitation

Ironically, the perception of female weakness can increase a woman's effectiveness in terror operations. Many female terrorists have exploited male assumptions about the *innocent woman* as a way to evade search and detection by predominantly male military forces. They sometimes revert to voluminous traditional dress, using fictive pregnancies or even real infants to hide explosive equipment. Other stereotypes, such as age, are also utilized. Soldiers may ignore an old woman egging on stone throwers, feeling it more important to capture the young boys following her instructions (Talbot, 2001). Israeli Security Sources (2002, 2003b) admit that, especially when dressed in Western clothes with modem hairstyles or maternity clothes, women can exploit the presumption of innocence, and soldiers may be hesitant to perform thorough body searches of women passing through checkpoints. However, this strategy can also backfire for the sponsoring terrorist organization. For example, Thawiya Hamour, 26, decided to abort her suicide mission at the last moment, "claiming her operators directed her to dress provocatively like an Israeli woman, such as wearing her hair down, using heavy makeup, and donning tight pants. During media interviews Hamour stated, 'I wasn't afraid. I'm not afraid to die. I went for personal reasons. However, I did not want to arrive 'upstairs' for impure reasons. I did not want to dress that way, because it is against my religion'" (Israeli Security Sources, 2003b, p.##). Not surprisingly, checkpoint security guidelines have evolved in response to terrorists' use of gender expectations (Victor, 2003). The requirement for tactical surprise, or to evade detection, has led to women being used to target high profile or hardened targets, such as the LTTE suicide bombing that killed Indian Prime Minister Ghandi. Chechen groups also used female suicide bombers in Russian underground bombings amidst a state of increased security in the country (Davis, 2013). Strategic purposes of terrorist groups using women involve a set of motivations such as a desire for more media attention and to signal to other groups their seriousness. In terms of the global *Salafist-jihadi* movement, Cunningham (2008) writes, "the willingness of Salafi jihadists to include women in their movement in a violent capacity symbolizes the expanding sense of threat that this movement perceives" (Patkin, 2004, p. 91) By including women in their ranks, the *jihadists* are expanding not only their recruiting base, but their support base, which may indicate that they, as a movement, are feeling the pressures of counterterrorism operations (Davis, 2013).

The Media

The media is used by terrorist organizations to promote their ideology, but they can cause conflicting events to occur within a terrorist organization. Terrorist and insurgent groups utilize the media to justify the addition or use of women in the struggle, either in advance of an attack or immediately after. In addition, women depicted in particular ways may help a terrorist organization recruit men; women's involvement may be a radicalizing (and/or shaming) event for some men, motivating them to join a group they otherwise would not (Davis, 2013). Terrorist groups may also benefit from the media's portrayal of women terrorists. When discussing motivation for terrorists, the media emphasizes the political for men and the personal for women. This may help groups achieve some level for approval from their support base for using women,

as their actions can be seen in retribution for some injustice done, not representing the broader politicization of women. Media attention devoted to female suicide bombers can help deliver group-based messages as well. For instance, media attention may signal to observers that the group has been driven to desperate measures by the opposing force. In other ways, media attention related to female suicide bombers can help groups differentiate themselves from other groups, particularly if their operating environment has multiple, competing groups (the operating space can be defined either geographically or ideologically) (Davis, 2013). In the case of the relatively few female terrorists, media coverage profoundly emphasizes the emotional over the ideological in an effort to provide comprehensible explanations. For example, media coverage of trend-setting female suicide bomber Wafa Idris (detonation 1/27/02) focused on her roles as a good friend and a loving daughter who volunteered with the Palestinian Red Crescent and had twice been hit by plastic-coated bullets in the line of duty. Friends said she was haunted by the terrible things she had seen, but they still wondered if she chose to die because her marriage had broken up (Beaumont, 2002). Although her sister reported that Idris used to say that she wanted to die as a martyr, her family expressed surprise at learning of her terrorist links. They said she was a cheerful if sometimes hot-tempered young woman. She and her husband had divorced when it became clear she could not have children after a miscarriage (Victor, 2003). Idris may have been depressed, stating, "I have become a burden on my family. They tell me they love me and want me, but I know from their gestures and expressions that they wish I didn't exist" (Victor, 2003, p. 196).

Deployment

From the aspects defined above, it may be possible to predict when or if female suicide bombers are likely to be deployed. If the area in conflict has a restrictive interpretation of women's participation in conflict or politics, then the chance of groups using female suicide bombers is reduced. The lack of history of female martyrdom operations makes female suicide attacks also less likely (Davis, 2013). However, if groups are experiencing recruiting pressures or significant counterterrorism pressures that have thwarted attacks or recruiting, then they are more likely to seek out women for suicide attacks. If multiple groups are competing, one or more may choose to separate themselves from other groups by using female suicide bombers. If their cause also lacks for media attention, the risk of groups using female suicide bombers is also increased. Consequently, as terrorist groups come under increasing pressure, it becomes more likely that they will recruit and deploy female suicide bombers. This last finding has interesting counterterrorism ramifications because it may signal the beginning of the end of a life cycle of a terrorist organization (Davis, 2013). For example, Boko Haram has been active in Nigeria since 2002 and began employing women to help their cause. In June 2013, an AK-47, a pistol and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were found in the clothing of two women in Maiduguri (Vanguard News, 30 June 2013). Women's involvement has increased overtime because they were and are able to avoid suspicion. Just recently, two female suicide bombers killed eight people and injured twelve at a camp for displaced persons by Boko Haram in Banki, Nigeria (Ola, 2016).

Hesitation

Islamist extremist groups incorporate women as tactical operatives because of structural and group factors. If women were incorporated into groups in roles other than that of a tactical operative, it would force the group to consider granting the women a post-conflict role in the event of a political or military victory. Female suicide bombers provide a unique opportunity for militant organizations, as there are no female ex-combatants to reintegrate into society, thus removing any question of how they will be treated after the war. This could explain why other groups in Iraq may be more hesitant to employ women; to do so is to give them agency in an organization, and if the potential exists for the group to achieve some level of political power, some of that power might have to be shared with women (Davis, 2013). This explanation also helps to understand why the Taliban or other groups in Afghanistan have yet to systematically use female suicide bombers. While not close to forming a governing structure in Afghanistan, there is the possibility that reconciliation and demobilization processes could incorporate Taliban elements into the Afghan government. If women were to be involved at the tactical, operational, or strategic levels, pressure could emerge to include them into the political structure. Of course, the question of whether or not women want to join Iraqi groups or the Taliban remains unanswered. The lack of women in the global *jihad* may also be explained by a lack of appeal of the Al Qaeda narrative. It is possible that women do not identify with the *jihadist* struggle to the same extent as men (Davis, 2013). It is also possible that the radicalizing factors that affect men and turn them toward the Al Qaeda narrative have not occurred (Davis, 2013).

Conclusion

Terrorism is not just a male issue; it is also a female issue. The difference is that the majority of radical Islamic women follow the female *jihad* and that this interpretation of the *jihad* is no less dangerous than the male interpretation, which means bearing arms and carrying out attacks. The female *jihad* signifies that women have a strong impact on the current and next generation of terrorists by supporting their husbands and brothers, facilitating the organizations and terrorist attacks, and educating their children to follow the ideology (Knop, 2007).

Women's involvement in the insurgency in Iraq marks a significant change in the global *jihad*. In the conflict in Iraq, they were employed as tactical operatives at an unprecedented level, for a variety of reasons ranging from the tactical to the strategic. Women's contribution in Iraq may have paved the way for additional involvement in the global *jihad* in conflicts as widespread as Somalia and Afghanistan. Fundamentalist religious groups linked to the global *jihad* have progressively started to use women as suicide bombers (Davis, 2013). In Pakistan, a woman was employed by the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) in 2009 to attack a police building in North-Western Peshawar and in 2012, female suicide attacks occurred in Somalia and Afghanistan (Noor, 2011).

Understanding how, when, and why a group employs women, particularly as suicide bombers, presents a unique opportunity for counterterrorist operations. By identifying a group's use of female suicide bombers as motivated by one or more of the factors outlined above, a counterinsurgency or terrorism and counter radicalization plan can be better articulated (Davis, 2013). In general, female terrorists are motivated by political and personal reasons. The wish and goal to carry out a political act should also not be underestimated. In conclusion, there exist many motivations for women to engage in terrorism in different ways. Even when the involvement of females in terrorist operations is on the rise it is still a rare issue (Knop, 2007).

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