Coerced and Glorified: Female Palestinian Suicide Bombers

Anna-Claire Bowers
West Virginia University

Follow this and additional works at: https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/murr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/murr/vol3/iss1/4
Introduction

Terrorism is loosely defined as acts of violence, which are intended to invoke fear into the population, are perpetrated with a political, ideological, or religious goal, and are committed by nongovernmental organizations, which target or disregard civilian casualties. For these contemporary terrorist organizations, suicide bombers are today’s weapon of choice in comparison with traditional armed methods and guerrilla tactics. Suicide bombers are now used by 17 terror organizations in 14 countries in order to obtain various political goals (Schweitzer 2006, 14). The institute for Counter-Terrorism defined suicide bombing as an “operational method in which the very act of the attack is dependent upon the death of the perpetrator” (Zedalis 2009, 2). The term “suicide bomber” carries heavy emotional weight, as some emphasize the murder and terror produced from this act, while others glorify them as martyrs.

Terrorist organizations are increasingly using suicide bombers because they are cheap, low risk, and do not require sophisticated technology. These weapons are also widely available, require little training, and effectively instill fear into the general population. In terms of casualties, suicide bombers are presently one of the most efficient forms of terrorism. “From 1980 to 2001, suicide attacks accounted for 3 percent of terrorist incidents but caused half of the total deaths due to terrorism—even if one excludes the unusually large number of fatalities of 9/11” (Pape 2003). The effectiveness of this weapon is dependent upon the element of surprise and accessibility of their targets; this requirement has recently been met using women who escape the stereotyped profile of a suicide bomber. Female suicide bombers have been used in a variety of venues, countries, and terrorist organizations, including developing states such as India, Turkey, Palestine, Chechnya, and Sri Lanka (Zedalis 2009, 13). Comprehending the use of women as suicide bombers is crucial for informing security studies to include women, who might otherwise have been ignored. Therefore, the development of female suicide bombers demands careful study of this strategic weapon through the analysis of bomber characteristics and motivations, specific examination of recent cases, and how these women are portrayed in the media. This study argues that female suicide bombers are used as a tactical weapon and are frequently forced to commit these acts of violence through religious and political rhetoric as well as patriarchal norms.
Female Suicide Bombers in the Context of Global Developing States

The history of female suicide bombing is relatively new. One of the first attacks occurred in 1985, when a sixteen-year-old Palestinian girl drove a truck into an Israeli checkpoint. Since then, women in Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Israel, and Turkey have strapped massive explosives to their bodies, carried bombs, and driven bomb-laden vehicles in order to complete acts of terrorism (see Figure 1). Many organizations known for terrorist activity, such as the Syrian Socialist Party, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, The Kurdistan Workers National Party, Chechen rebels, Al Aqs Martyrs, and most recently, Hamas, have publicized female suicide bombers in order to gain attention for their causes (Whaley Eager 2008, 171). The method of suicide bombing has proven to be so unnerving and effective that its use has spread among many different groups, specifically in the Middle East. Palestinian suicide bombers have carried out a large portion of the more recent attacks; in 2002 the first Palestinian female suicide bomber, Wafa Idris, detonated a twenty-two-pound body bomb in an Israeli shopping district (Zedalis 2009, 17).

Understanding why are female suicide bombers used is a question critical to understanding the phenomenon of female suicide bombers. Globally, there are over twenty-three terrorist organizations that use women as weapons for a number of reasons (ORourke 2009, 681). Mostly, they provide a strategic advantage. There is a hesitancy to search women and females because they are stereotyped as pacifists, which can lead to more successful attacks. They also provide an increased number of combatants as well as publicity, which can produce a larger number of recruits overall. The additional media attention resulting from their attacks encourages terrorist organizations to capitalize on their sensationalism. Such terrorist groups believe that suicide bombers have the ability to bring notice to their political cause and contend that suicide bombers are the only effective means of weapons they have, in contrast to their enemies’ overwhelming military and

![Figure 1. Female Suicide Bombers, by Targeted Areas, 1985-2006](https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/murr/vol3/iss1/4)

Source: Database compiled by Yoram Schweitzer
financial strength. The psychological effect of terrorism on the population at large holds significant weight as well, as it adds an increased sense of vulnerability and desperation. Middle Eastern scholars have theorized that the use of Palestinian militant groups is specifically designed to embarrass the Israeli regime and show that the situation is desperate enough that women are fighting instead of the men. This idea could be applied to the Black Widows in Chechnya; these combatants are an all-female terrorist group that organizes politically motivated attacks on Russia (Spekhard, Ahkmedova 2006, 63).

Who becomes a suicide bomber is an elusive and complicated question for both males and females. There are some definite trends suggested, but these are also highly disputed, while others maintain that a rigid profile is impossible to develop. Factors assessed in order to create a profile include age, education, economic standing, and socialization toward violence. The only factor that is an accurate indicator is age; virtually all suicide bombers tend to be young people (see Figure 2). The average age varies from 21.5 (Turkey) to 23 (Lebanon), a small differential. Additionally, education appears to play a role as “the percentage increases with the level of education: 8.3 percent among elementary school diploma versus 12.8 percent among those with a university degree” (Zedalis 2009, 14). This finding is particularly interesting and frightening as it might be assumed that the inverse is true (see figure 3).

![Figure 2, Female Suicide Terrorists: Breakdown by Age (Yoram Schweitzer)](image)

![Figure 3, Female Suicide Terrorists: Education Level (Yoram Schweitzer)](image)

Women’s participation in terrorist attacks vary widely, and it is difficult to generalize simply because of its small sample size and limited research completed on the subject. Despite limited data, female suicide bombers, just like their
female counterparts, have one factor in common: they are almost all young (see figure 2). Other characteristics do not seem to produce causation; there are mothers, widows, highly educated professionals, and both impoverished and middle class women who participate in these violent acts. Many analysts have compared the Black Widows in Chechnya to the Palestinian suicide bombers, as some scholars have characterized these conflicts as politically motivated struggles for national identity paired with religious overtones (Spekhard and Akhmedova 2006, 68).

Analysts and scholars have tried to look for the motivations to become a suicide bomber, and can point to numerous religious, nationalistic, economic, and social rewards. Researchers have also concluded that the motivations for women and men carrying out a suicide attack are frequently the same. They are committed, patriotic believers, and this is frequently combined with a sense of religious duty. Religious terrorism is particularly powerful as a religious component offers justification for violent atrocities and otherwise immoral acts. Many suicide bombers see their actions as dictated by a higher power that will reward them in the afterlife. This Muslim idea dictates that the after-life of every martyr will be greeted with purification of all sins and all the pleasures of God’s graces (Yadlin 2006, 52).

In addition to religious and political motivations, suicide bombers may be motivated economically by the monetary rewards given to their family. Besides the clear economic incentive, a son or daughter who becomes a martyr may enhance the family’s social status and reputation. After their death, suicide bombers are frequently heroically glorified, invoking a culture of martyrdom while increasing recruitment. Many organizations are now deliberately targeting women for recruitment as female suicide bombers receive much greater attention from the media. In this way, the media becomes both an advertising and recruitment tool for terrorist groups, as the public perception of terrorism is frequently determined by the degree of media coverage, not the level of violence. Counter terrorism experts are concerned that if women continue to follow suit, it will attract disproportionate publicity; this trend may create worldwide sympathy for suicide bombers, and serve as a terrorist recruitment tool (Alvanou 2006, 91).

In reviewing the literature surrounding female suicide bombers, it is clear that who and why someone becomes a suicide bomber are complex, indefinite questions. Regardless, it is unmistakable that women are being used as a tactic to evade security measures and increase recruitment. These women are often forced into committing such acts due to a wide variety of factors: religious pressures, economic incentives, and gender norms existing in their societies. Studying female terrorism is becoming increasingly important as security measures and cultural perspectives must be adjusted to include women. The case of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is representative of the phenomenon, as it provides clear examples of women being coerced into choosing violence and being used as a tool to increase recruitment for suicide bombing. It also offers an opportunity to study female suicide terrorism in the context of an ongoing conflict, which is increasingly utilizing females as terrorists within a patriarchal, Islamic society.
Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is an emotionally charged one for many peoples of the region and is often associated with religious violence. Palestinian women have played a distinct role in the conflict as mothers and most recently, as suicide bombers themselves. During the first Palestinian intifada (uprising) against Israel, in 1987, women were called upon by the leaders of the Palestinian national movement to play a traditional female role as mothers of the nation. Muslim women’s role in the struggle for liberation was not to participate in the actual resistance, but to produce the men who would become suicide bombers and jihadists. This discourse transformed Palestinian women’s fertility into a nationalist patriotic subject. However, the most recent intifada in 2000 differed through “a gender-oriented social agenda as an alternative to the national agenda of the hegemonic male leadership; an alternative motherhood, along with the previous recruited national motherhood; and the phenomenon of women suicide bombers” (Shweitzer 2006, 7). The appearance of women taking an active, violent role in the conflict was both glorified and demonized in the media, but both their roles as mothers of the jihad and as suicide bombers themselves has only preserved traditional gender roles (Tzoreff 2006, 14).

Wafa Idris blew herself up on a main street in Jerusalem on January 27, 2002 and Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade claimed responsibility for the first shahida. Wafa was born in a refugee camp in 1975 and was married to her first cousin at the age of sixteen. Unable to carry a pregnancy to term, patriarchal norms devalued her position in life due to her inability to have children. Wafa later became a volunteer for the Red Crescent, experiencing atrocities that supposedly deeply haunted her. Although much speculation exists about her ideological motivations, testimony from her friends and family suggest she committed the act for personal reasons. Wafa was twenty-five, divorced by her husband, barren, and had become an economic burden on her parents’ home. Although her friends admit she was disturbed by the terrible actions she witnessed committed toward Palestinians by Israelis, they speculate her act was due to the failure of her marriage (Whaley Eager 2008, 188-189). Wafa’s suicide bombing was monumental, as it pioneered the path for other Palestinian women unable to meet society’s expectations, such as Darin Abu-Aisha, a twenty-two year old student from a village near Nablus (Tzoreff 2006, 21).

Darine Abu-Aisha provides another case of a female suicide bomber forced into committing violence through societal pressures. A twenty year-old university student from a privileged background, Darine does not fit the profile of a stereotyped suicide bomber. According to interviews with her family, Darine was deeply humiliated at an Israeli checkpoint after being forced to kiss her male companion who she was not married to. After the incident she was seen as unmarriageable and completely disgraced in the community. Upon refusing to marry her companion with whom she had shared the humiliating experience, a male relative introduced her to Hamas leaders at the university Darine attended. Shortly afterward and with minimal training, Darine killed herself and wounded several Israelis at a checkpoint. The patriarchal, coercive methods driving Darine’s attack are evident. Due to one degrading incident, Darine lacked a respectable future and turned to desperate violence with the direction of a male relative (Whaley Eager 2008, 188).

A third case, involving Reem Salih al-Rayasha, also depicts the coercion of Palestinian women to commit terrorist acts. Allegedly involved in an adulter-
ous affair, the twenty-two year old mother of two children detonated a bomb at a border checkpoint between Palestine and Israel, killing four Israeli soldiers. It is believed that marital problems initiated her adultery and her husband and lover both sent her on the suicide mission in order to avoid social sanctions she would have faced by the community at large. This case reinforces the idea that the inclusion of women in terrorist suicide bombings is not leading to greater equality or secularization in the Palestinian community. It only reaffirms their role as second-class, commoditized citizens.

Although it is clear that these women committed terrorist acts in desperation and as a result of marginalization, some scholars argue that this phenomenon represents a cultural shift. Not only was the phenomenon of Palestinian female suicide bombers unprecedented, it departed from generalized stereotypes of women. In societies where sharia (Islamic law) is used and in secular states as well, women are frequently perceived as more timid, modest, and responsible for the honor of the family based on the maintenance of their sexual purity. Such cultural and religious norms frequently confine women to the private sphere, and their traits may be perceived as a social and religious commandment internalized by women at large and harshly enforced by certain governments. The widespread response to female Palestinian suicide bombers committing terrorist attacks has been argued as a direct challenge to such entrenched social norms. Some scholars, such as Shibli Telhami of Maryland University and the Brookings Institute, have perceived the inclusion of female suicide bombers indicates a greater secularization of the phenomenon. Miriam Cooke of Duke University concluded that, “female martyrdom must be accounted for by a total despair of the Arab woman in the struggle to empower herself against the U.S., the old colonial forces, and her husband.” Regardless, according to a 2003 article in the Washington Post, female suicide bombers are portrayed as marginalized and the desperate product of aberrant backgrounds and patriarchal ideals (Stern, 2003).

Despite the alleged secularization and feminization of the movement by some scholars, Palestinian female suicide bombers are not challenging societal roles and are largely coerced to perform such crimes due to patriarchal pressure (It is important to note that women are not in leadership positions in any of the organizations that have claimed responsibility for their attacks). Palestinian women are not the ideologues or organizers for Islamic or secular terrorist organizations, and their opinions are not a determining factor even in the suicide missions on which they are sent (Whaley Eager 2008, 194). Yoram Schweitzer has demonstrates this in his study of women within organizations practicing terrorist acts:

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. (Schweitzer 2006, 23)

Authors Mia Bloom and Barbara Victor have completed detailed analysis
on the suicide bomber problem. Both have argued that the inclusion of women is not a sign of gender equality (Shweitzer 2006, 25). Rather, they are often raped, sexually abused, and taken advantage of, and forced to commit terrorist acts. Women are portrayed in the media as supportive toward Palestinian nationalism, but the motivation to become a martyr is a distorted fulfillment of patriarchal ideas. Deborah Gavin encapsulates this viewpoint:

Female terrorism has no autonomy. It is part of a male engineered, male dominated activity and even the most ardent feminists must recognize both the fact and the remote likelihood of it changing. Terrorism is all about power. The male terrorist struggling for power is not about to share it with the female, though he welcomes her aid and actively seeks to co-opt it. (Whaley Eager 2008, 190)

Palestinian women such as Wafa, Darine, and Reem are frequently used by terrorist organizations to gain notoriety and greater attention in the media. Globally, female suicide bombers draw much more notice in the press than male suicide bombers. Palestinian terrorist organizations such as Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade have used the media’s increased interest in female suicide bombers to publicize their political motivations. After the attack by Wafa Idris, Egypt’s weekly Al Shabab published an editorial exclaiming: “It’s a Woman!” The editorial stated: “It is a woman who teaches you today a lesson in heroism, who teaches you the meaning of Jihad…It is a woman who has shocked the enemy with her thin meager and weak body” (Whaley Eager 2008, 190). The day that her bombing took place, posters instantly appeared of Wafa wearing a green headband saying: “Allah is the answer,” while carrying an assault rifle (Whaley Eager 2008, 188). Although this could be marketed as feminist rhetoric, it still maintains that women are weak, meager, and thin, and their gender is inferior to men.

Israeli and Arab press have differed in their depictions of Palestinian female suicide bombers. Both sides have publicized competing versions of reality. Israeli media often perpetuates the chauvinism existing in Arab society by portraying the women in a sympathetic light in comparison with male suicide bombers. Israeli media judges men more harshly as economic and security issues are always a cause and concern, while social issues are rarely highlighted. This narrative portrays women as weak and easily manipulated by the men in their lives. In doing so, it focuses on personal motivations such as being divorced, raped, or barren instead of the potential political reasons for their actions. Although their personal motivations are important, it should not be completely divorced from the political (Issacharoff 2009, 43). A report in Yediot Ahronot stated:

This is how terrorist organizations recruit female suicide terrorists to commit suicide attacks: ‘If you don’t commit a suicide terrorist attack, we’ll tell people you were raped.’ Agents of Fatah and Tanzim in the Beit Lehem area rape young Palestinian women, or seduce them into having sexual relations. Then they blackmail them by telling them, ‘Either you commit suicide attacks, or we’ll tell your family.’ These are reports obtained by IDF intelligence sources. (Issacharoff 2009, 44)
A local newspaper *Kol Hazman* also wrote about Wafa Idris, the first Palestinian female suicide terrorist, in a similar manner:

Her father died when she was eight years old. Her brother served ten years in an Israeli prison, and founded al-Aqsa Brigades in the al-Amri refugee camp. Her husband divorced her after she had a miscarriage in the seventh month of pregnancy, and two months ago, she refused to remarry. Is it possible that Wafa Idris, a paramedic in the Red Crescent, committed suicide this week on Jaffa Street mostly because her life was so miserable? (Issacharoff 2009, 44)

In contrast, the Arab media downplays social issues and develops the Islamic feminist dimension, portraying women as key players in the national and religious jihad of Palestine (Issacharoff 2009, 46). For example, another Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahkbar* wrote about Wafa Idris:

The body parts of the *shahida* outlined the change on the earth of the fatherland, and in the ideology of the struggle. Palestinian women have torn the gender classification out of their birth certificates, declaring that sacrifice for the Palestinian homeland would not be for men alone; on the contrary, all Palestinian women will write the history of the liberation with their blood, and will become time bombs in the face of the Israeli enemy. (Issacharoff 2009, 49)

However, this Islamic feminist perspective has faced criticism from religious and secular leaders who have publicized their feelings that motherhood is the real jihad for women. Regardless, both perspectives about women’s involvement in the struggle for liberation do not reflect a reality of improved gender equality for Palestinian women. It only displays the coercive tactics used by religious militants and terrorist organizations through targeted discourse.

Consequently, what is special about female suicide bombers and why do they merit scholarly study? Firstly, using female suicide bombers is an extremely effective tactic.

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. (Shweitzer 2006, 22)

They offer an element of surprise required for a terrorist attack that is not provided by their male counterparts. Secondly, the gender-specific norms in nations, such as Palestine, are used by terrorist organizations to develop discourse that specifically targets women (ORourke 2009). The position of women in terrorist studies is dependent on the cultural, social, and religious standards, which place them in a different position than men. “They are ‘special’ deviants, not because the operational method of their self-immolation differs from that of men, but because their womanhood plays a key role in the way the whole social environment influences them” (Alavnou 2006, 96).
Recommendations

Security and counter-terrorism policies need to adjust and defend against the rising trend of female suicide terrorists. States like Israel, which are targeted by female suicide bombers, need to revise their policies to include and undermine women’s advantages in achieving surprise and concealing their explosives. If such changes were made, female suicide bombers would be expected to decline. However, it is unlikely that more effective counterterrorism measures will be applied to women. Counterterrorism efforts geared toward women are usually extremely slow to develop and targeted states occupying a territory, such as Palestine, risk violent outbreaks if it is viewed they are trying to win loyalty from local women (ORourke 2009, 692). Additionally, religious groups using women as suicide bombers illustrate a willingness to develop further tactics to overcome security measures.

Terrorism expert Jessica Stern recently criticized the Department of Homeland Security for ignoring the potential threat of female terrorists: “The official profile of a typical terrorist-developed by the DHS to scrutinize visa applicants and resident aliens-applies only to men. Under a program put in place after September 11, 2001, males aged between 16-45 are subject to special scrutiny; women are not.” Counterterrorism strategies nationwide and internationally should not rely on profiling based on gender or race, as this practice puts both Americans and citizens of other nations at risk. A comprehensive counterterrorism plan should recognize the increasing potential for use of suicide bombers, including females. A female suicide bomber representing Al Qaeda has yet to act, but in March 2003 this information was uncovered in an interview:

*Asharq Al-Awsat*, leader of the female mujahedeen of Al Qaeda, told them her instructions came from Al Qaeda and the Taliban, mainly via internet...The woman went on to state that the organization was planning “a new attack which would make the United States forget September 11, and that the idea came from the martyr operations carried out by the Palestinian women. (Agence France Presse, 2003)

Due to their strategic advantage, it is likely that a terrorist organization like Al Qaeda will continue to use suicide bomber tactics and employ female suicide bombers. Global and domestic security policies must be adjusted to include the potential for female suicide bombers, as the safety of citizenry in the United States and worldwide depends upon it.
Bibliography

Alvanou, Maria. 2006. “Criminology and the Study of Female Suicide Terrorism.” Jafee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University. 84: 91-106. Print.


