



WOMEN AS VICTIMS AND VICTIMIZERS

Mia Bloom

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On November 9, 2005, Muriel Degauque, a Belgian convert to radical Islam, blew herself up in a suicide car bombing in Iraq. That same day, Sajida Atrous al-Rishawi's explosive belt failed to detonate at a hotel wedding reception in Amman.

Despite the shock associated with the above events, women have long been involved in terrorist movements. In the 1970s and 1980s, many were prominently active in Latin American and European terrorist organizations and, depending on the group, may have constituted as much as one-third of the personnel—as was the case of Germany's Red Army Faction and Second of June Movement. However, the migration of women functioning from mostly supportive roles to more active, operational roles, such as suicide bombers, is much more recent. The first was a 17-year-old Lebanese girl who blew herself up near an Israeli convoy in 1985. This growing role of women in terrorism has caused new questions to surface.

Out of the approximately 17 groups that have used the tactic of suicide bombing, women have been operatives in more than half. Between 1985 and 2006, there were more than 220 women suicide bombers, representing about 15 percent of the total number of such attacks. Moreover, the upsurge in the number of female bombers has come from



This Iraqi woman, whose son is missing following a suicide car bomb attack at a police checkpoint in Baghdad, Iraq, in September 2005, is only one of the thousands of victims of terrorism.
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both secular and religious organizations, even though religious groups initially resisted the use of women in such contexts.¹

Since September 2005, when a female suicide bomber set off a blast in the northwest city of Tal Afar that killed eight Iraqi army recruits and wounded 30, several more such cases have emerged in Iraq. That December, two women blew themselves up in a classroom at Baghdad's police academy, killing 27, and as recently as February 25, 2007, a female bomber killed 42 and injured 51 at Baghdad's second largest college, Mustansiriyah University.

The Question of "Why"

It is typical following such events for the media to dissect the presumed motivations of the bomber, but the overwhelming reaction is shock that a woman—usually perceived as the victim, not the perpetrator, of violence—would do such a thing.

Terrorism experts, psychologists, and political analysts frequently engage in developing a "psychological autopsy," examining where the perpetrator



February 2006, female Iranian students fill out registration forms indicating their readiness to carry out suicide attacks.
©AP Images/Hasan Sarbakshian

grew up, where she went to school, and what went wrong to make her turn to violence. A common assumption is that she must be depressed, crazy, suicidal, or psychopathic, and, overwhelmingly, that it must have been a man who made her do it.

However, years of research finds psychopathology and personality disorder no more likely among terrorists than among non-terrorists from the same communities. And although we no longer believe men force most women into terrorism, the men in these women's lives play an important role in mobilizing them to terrorism. According to Deborah Galvin, "Some women are recruited into terrorist organizations by boyfriends. A significant feature that may characterize the involvement of the female terrorist is the male or female lover/female accomplice ... scenario."² In fact, though al-Rishawi failed in her attempt to kill the Amman wedding celebrants, her husband, who accompanied her, succeeded in murdering 38.

The British journalist Eileen MacDonald relates how "Begona" explained joining the ETA (the Basque nationalist terrorist group in Spain and France) at age 25 "because a man I knew was a member."³ Rumors also abound of men seducing women into participation in violence through sexual misconduct, requiring a subsequent "act of martyrdom" as the only way to purify the family name and save face. Nevertheless, it is misleading to assume that women are merely victims or pawns of men without any political motivation of their own. In fact, one of the most reliable predictors of a women's involvement in a particular movement is her relationship to a former or current terrorist in that movement. In al-Rishawi's case, several of her brothers had been killed in Iraq fighting in the insurgency against Coalition troops, while her marriage of a few days had been arranged to facilitate the operation.

Some psychologists explain that terrorists typically suffer from "narcissistic injuries"—essentially, a lasting damage to their self-image and self-esteem severe enough to force the discredited self to seek a new, "positive identity" (i.e., achieving a sense of "belonging" as a member of a terrorist group). Psychologist Joseph Margolin argues that "much terrorist behavior is a response to the frustration of various political, economic, and personal needs or objectives."⁴ Dr. Randy Borum adds: "The link between frustration (being prevented from attaining a goal or engaging in a behavior) and aggression [may be] a 'master explanation' for understanding the cause of human violence."⁵ Other experts go so far as to assert that most terrorists are borderline autistic, and thus gravitate to the ideologies that simplify the world into black and white, good and evil.⁶

Root Causes

Authors from the fields of psychology, sociology, and political science all identify root causes as key to understanding why most terrorism occurs. Much of what is listed as a root cause, however, also explains mobilization of non-terrorist political groups and, therefore, falls into the category of "necessary though insufficient" explanations for why these factors result, for some, in a turn to violence. They include:

- Lack of democracy, civil liberties, and the rule of law
- Failed or weak states that provide havens for terrorists
- Too rapid modernization
- Extremist ideologies—both secular and religious
- A history of political violence, civil wars, revolutions, dictatorships, or occupation

- Illegitimate or corrupt governments
- Repression by foreign occupation or colonial powers
- The experience of discrimination on the basis of ascriptive (ethnic, racial, or religious) characteristics
- Social injustice
- The presence of charismatic ideological leaders⁷

According to experts like Yoram Schweitzer and Farhana Ali, women tend to be motivated by reasons that are more "personal" than those that influence men. These can be summarized as the four R's: Revenge, Redemption, Respect, and Relationship. In particular, they include:

- The loss of a loved one (usually the dominant male in their life—their husband, father, or brother)
- A need to reinvent themselves because of alleged or real sexual misconduct
- An inability to conceive children or being considered not marriageable⁸
- A desire to improve the status of women in their society
- Proof that they are just as dedicated as the men to the Cause
- Being the sisters, daughters, or wives of well-known insurgents⁹



During a 2004 rally in support of Hamas, a Palestinian boy holds a photograph of a

Differences and Similarities

Assuming, however, that women are motivated by reasons different from those influencing men is problematic. Like men, most women are inspired by both personal and political reasons to engage in violence. Psychologist Ariel Merari states: "Culture in general and religion in particular seem to be relatively unimportant in the phenomenon of terrorist suicide. Terrorist suicide, like any other suicide, is basically an individual rather than a

woman who blew herself up at the major crossing point between Israel and the Gaza Strip, killing four ©AP Images/Khalil Hamra group phenomenon: People who wish to die for personal reasons do it. The terrorist framework simply offers the excuse (rather than the real drive) for doing it and the legitimation for carrying it out in a violent way."¹⁰

For both male and female terrorists, the cause includes a view of the world that makes sense of their imminent death and often links them to some form of "immortality." Recently, there is a tendency to assume a natural connection between faith and the willingness to kill and be killed.¹¹ However, no *a-priori* link between religion and terror has thus far been established.

In fact, historically, many terrorist groups—such as the Red Brigades in Italy, the Red Army Faction in Germany, and the Shining Path in Peru—were radical-socialists with no religious connection whatsoever. They did, however, include the liberation of women as part of their political program.

Most women involved in terrorism today appear to fulfill a role as inexpensive cannon fodder. In general, it appears they have become a tactical innovation because they deviate from established counterterrorist profiles and stereotypes. Furthermore, as anyone who has watched the movie *The Battle of Algiers* can attest, female operatives can easily blend in with the enemy's civilian population for reconnaissance purposes: Their clothing readily hides bombs, and they sometimes use the appearance of being pregnant to discourage searches. But, in fact, few women are permitted to engage in leadership functions, even in groups where they comprise 30 to 60 percent of the bombers. According to Clara Beyler, speaking of the use of Palestinian terrorist organizations: "Women are rarely involved in the higher echelons of the decision-making process of these groups. Women may volunteer, or ... women might be coerced to conduct a murderous strike, but the woman's role is ultimately dictated by the patriarchal hierarchy that rules Palestinian society and its terrorist groups."¹²

In reality, those who engage in violence are few relative to any overall movement. Since terrorists are but a fraction of the group they purport to represent, their real opposition is often from moderates in their own community who prefer alternatives to violence. Terrorists, therefore, seek to force a violent counter-response from authorities that will elicit sympathy and support, radicalize more members of the community, and help mobilize more recruits. By using female operatives, terrorist organizations hope for overreaction against the women of their society, a surefire way to elicit further outrage and anger.

No General Patterns

A principal goal of terrorism is to foster fear and uncertainty beyond the immediate victims by destroying lives and property in hopes of causing greater long-term costs. Terrorists want the enemy to expend time and money bolstering security; their desire is to charge an enormous tax on the enemy's society, forcing it to transfer resources from production to anti-productive measures.¹³

One potentially useful counterterrorism initiative is to appeal to the larger community and bolster moderates. Addressing the root causes may not eliminate violence, but it might help to show that moderates are able to deliver benefits to the population while the terrorists cannot. Most surveys indicate that the support for violence decreases when there are viable alternatives and better prospects for peace.¹⁴

For women, it is important to emphasize that they can play a positive role in their societies and make a greater and more meaningful contribution in life than in death. It would help to support women's grassroots organizations that benefit the community as a whole. Such groups can form the backbone of a civil society that can bridge different communities and lay the groundwork for the emergence of real democracy.¹⁵

The most important issues to make clear are that there are no general patterns, no reliable profiles, and no way to explain every kind of terrorism.

Psychologist John Horgan explains that every terrorist movement is complex in its own way, and that even the smallest of groups are characterized by a variety of roles leading to "different kinds of involvement"¹⁶ both for men and women. Furthermore, there are so many different kinds of terrorism, conducted for different reasons, that it is not possible to identify a single cause of any individual form of terrorism—Islamist, global Salafist, single issue (e.g., environmental, animal rights), right-wing racist, nationalist-separatist—let alone one that explains the motivations for all women.

I have argued elsewhere that there are calculated organizational motivations for using women. The leaders of terrorist movements make cost-benefit calculations to select tactics, targets, and perpetrators, and women suicide bombers are cheap weapons. Further, they garner significantly more media attention and may also shame men into becoming mobilized instead of letting women "do their job."¹⁷

Undeniably, however, more useful data could be obtained if researchers could speak directly with members of known foreign terrorist movements. Although access to such primary sources has been limited,¹⁸ as Horgan argues: "Unpalatable as it may seem, it is inevitable that to

understand the development and structure of terrorist behavior, we have to meet with and speak to people who have been, or are, involved in terrorist violence."¹⁹ This is particularly true in determining why women, traditionally nurturers, choose to become killers.

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Endnotes

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