

# THE CHANGING NATURE OF WOMEN IN EXTREMISM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

(0) We remain fascinated by terrorist acts and how seemingly normal people transform into cold-blooded killers. We have certain preconceived notions about who becomes a terrorist and why. Much of the conventional wisdom and preconceived notions are more conventional wisdom that empirically based on reality and facts. Mohammed Emwazi previously known as 'Jihad John' an educated middle class British citizen who became notorious for beheading Western aid workers and journalists in Syria surprised many who saw an educated Westernized person with no history of radical views<sup>(1)</sup>. The stereotypes about terrorists include faulty assumptions about sanity, a history of anti social behavior, poverty, or drug and alcohol abuse<sup>(2)</sup>. More often than not, terrorist groups use these assumptions to their benefit. Among the many assumptions about level of education, wealth, and ethnic background inevitably has also been that of gender.



When most people superficially picture the stereotypical terrorist, they usually think of a male, between the ages of 18 and 30, perhaps of Middle Eastern or Arabic descent. Few people immediately associate terrorism with women even though women have always been involved in terrorism and political violence. From the very beginning as far back as the nineteenth century women have played key roles in violent extremist organizations. The very first person ever to be tried for terrorism, Vera Zasulich, was a woman and an anarchist for the Narodnaya Volya (People's Will) in Tsarist Russia. In January 1878 Vera and her co-conspirator Masha Kolenkina shot Theodore Trepov, the governor general of St. Petersburg with a revolver hidden under her shawl. Trepov survived the assassination attempt. Zasulich was arrested and tried for attempted murder. The trial of the century attracted huge crowds including the entirety of Russia's intellectual elite. On the stand Zasulich balked at the attempted murder charges levied against her. "I am a terrorist... not a murder!" She proudly proclaimed. Vera was ultimately acquitted as the crowd lifted her out of the courtroom and carried her on their shoulders in victory. Among Zasulich's associates in Narodnaya Volya were other women, Vera Figner, Maria Oshanina, Anna Yakimova, and Sophia Perovskaya were all key members of the organization and as much as one third of the core leadership of the People's Will was female. After the trial, Zasulich was celebrated as a martyr for the oppressed social classes and became the face of the revolution. <sup>(3)</sup>

Women's participation in terrorism may be considered a natural progression from their involvement in radical and revolutionary struggles of the past.<sup>(4)</sup> The women of Narodnaya Volya were reportedly more willing to die for the cause than their male comrades.<sup>(5)</sup> Women engaged in anti-colonial and revolutionary struggles in the Third World for decades.

Historically women's primary contribution to political movements was to give birth to the future generation of fighters and raise them to be ideologically steadfast and perfect soldiers. In the modern period, to the extent that women were involved, they tended to play a more peripheral role by providing support to terrorist groups.

Beginning in 1968, women became involved in all manner of insurgent and terror groups from the Marxist organizations in Europe, to the nationalist movements of the Middle East. Female militants came from all parts of the globe and from all walks of life; Italy's Red Brigades, Germany's Baader-Meinhof group, the Black Panthers, the Weathermen, and the Japanese Red Army included prominent women.<sup>(6)</sup> For the organizations that addressed women's equality as part of their political platform, women rose through the ranks and became leaders in their own right.

In the 1960s and 1970s, women played key roles in some of the European groups. Ulrike Meinhoff helped found the Baader Meinhof group also known as the Red Army Faction in Germany. Her partner in the organization, Astrid Proll was a vital operative in several attacks. While Meinhoff lent her name to the group as its key ideologue, most women did not emerge as leaderships. Russell and Miller's landmark study analyzed 350 terrorists from 1966 to 1976 in which women were associated with terrorist movements such as the Red Army Faction and the Red Brigades (Brigate Rosse). The study assessed membership in the major left wing and nationalist groups in South America, Western Europe, the Middle East, and Japan. Despite the highly visible exploits of a handful of women; the general pattern for most terrorist organizations was that women were dramatically underrepresented. Aside from the German Red Army Faction and Revolutionary cells (that included a substantial female involvement) women represented less than 20 percent of the total. More importantly, women often played secondary roles to men. Leonard Weinberg and Bill Eubank explained, "Women who carried out attacks or who served as leaders were exceedingly rare."<sup>(7)</sup>

Women nevertheless provided a powerful symbol of the struggles and were featured in the organizations' propaganda. In part this might have been an attempt to portray a more egalitarian society or perhaps to attract male recruits. So while they were not leaders, they were important elements of the propaganda. One such example was Leila Khaled who became the poster child for Palestinian militancy as a member of the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine). Khaled was involved in multiple hijacking operations between 1969 and 1970 and became an icon of Palestinian resistance, inspiring poems and songs in six different languages.

Another female source on inspiration (terrorist 'cover girl') was Mairead Farrell of the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland. Shot in Gibraltar in 1988 during an operation to bomb British soldiers, Farrell was a leading member of PIRA.<sup>(8)</sup> She participated in the dirty protests (refusal to bathe or wash) and even led several women to join the hunger strikes in 1981. As the leader of women in Armagh jail. Farrell was so revered that she is still lionized by Republicans and dissidents alike.<sup>(9)</sup>

Farrell was not the only woman involved with the Provisional IRA. Women's roles ranged from banging garbage can lids to alert the men that the British soldiers were coming, (as portrayed in the film '71), to involvement with active service units (ASUs) by sisters Dolours and Anne Price who intimidated in their ability to kill and deceive the British Authorities.<sup>(10)</sup>

While women have been involved in violent extremism in Europe for decades, the face of Islamist extremists and Salafi Jihadis has traditionally been male because of patriarchal interpretations about women's freedom of movement and expectations about the appropriate role a woman can and should have. For the past few years, this has ceased to be the case. Groups that previously eschewed engaging women now recruit and engage women with increasing lethality. Women have played a variety of roles in terrorist groups, as recruiters, propagandists, quartermasters, fund-raisers, and even as suicide bombers. Groups that previously eschewed women's involvement now recruit women and girls deliberately.<sup>(11)</sup>

Between 1985 and 2010, female bombers committed over 257 suicide attacks (representing about a quarter of the total) on behalf of many different terrorist organizations.<sup>(12)</sup> The percentage of women since 2002 in some countries exceeds as much as fifty percent of the operatives. The women have killed hundreds of men, women, and children and their acts have maimed, blinded or crippled thousands more. Dozens more women have tried and failed, and allegedly hundreds are being trained for the future.<sup>(13)</sup> The numbers have increased in the past five years partly because groups like Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, the Taliban and others have begun to deploy female operatives in greater numbers. While Al Qaeda was a late adopter of this tactical innovation, by 2005 it became clear that women could do things men could not.

The media fetishizes female terrorists and contributes to the belief that there is something unique, something just not right about the women who kill. The Western media make assumptions about what the women think, why they do what they do, and what ultimately motivates them.<sup>(14)</sup> Women are hardly the obvious or natural choice for terrorism.

Considered nurturers and not destroyers, they are often regarded as too “soft” and vulnerable for terrorism. Innovative terrorist groups exploit gender stereotypes and cultural clichés to their advantage. After all, perpetrating acts that cause wanton destruction, death and disorder seem incompatible with the traditional stereotypes of women – to be nurturing, caring figures that provide stability consistent with the principles of UNSCR 1325. Terrorist groups use women when male operatives are unavailable, when a target is especially difficult to penetrate or when they hope to evade capture.

Assumptions that women are inherently more peaceful or not a threat have lulled security forces into complacency. As late as 2006, US soldiers in Iraq were told not to invasively search Iraqi women in the Sunni triangle for fear of antagonizing the local population. A former U.S. Marine officer who fought in the Battle of Falluja said, “If we are not allowed to look at Iraqi women, then how can we search for the bomb under the abaya?”<sup>(15)</sup>

Female suicide bombers appear to be ideal operatives as they can penetrate the defenses of the security forces. Women bypass security checkpoints, often manned by male members of the security apparatus or military. The traditional and modest robes easily conceal a vest or belt packed with explosives. The improvised explosive device (IED) is placed under traditional and loose fitting clothing, strapped around the woman’s midsection to give the impression of a late-term pregnancy. Security personnel make assumptions about the inherent peacefulness of women. An expectant mother carries with it a host of additional stereotypes and expectations. If anything, the appearance of late-term pregnancy has discouraged invasive body searches and frisking for fear of alienating and antagonizing the local population.<sup>(16)</sup>

Alternatively, depending on the context in order to throw off security personnel, instead of loose billowing robes, female bombers might hyper Westernize their appearance, wear heavy make up and immodest clothing, like mini-skirts, midriff baring shirts, and revealing tank tops. This transformation of traditional women from demure to attractive, distracting and invisible has been convincingly portrayed in the film “The Battle of Algiers” wherein Algerian women cut and dye their hair, put on makeup and Western dresses to smuggle weapons through French military checkpoints and plant bombs in cafes. <sup>(17)</sup>

Fifty years on, using female operatives remains one of the best ways to get through checkpoints, because even after all the years of female terrorists and suicide bombers (since 1987 and across over a dozen different conflicts) people are still amazed when a woman is involved (e.g., recently Hayat Boumedienne in the Paris attacks).

Women provide an excellent cover when they are acting individually or in teams. If the authorities are on the lookout for male perpetrators, the presence of a woman (often posing as part of a couple) can help avoid detection - as was often the case with male Active Service Units of the Provisional IRA or male/female teams in Somalia for al Shabaab.<sup>(18)</sup> A couple with a child (posing as a family) is even more effective. For several years the US military had in place a profile for car and truck bombers with one exception, if there was a child in the car, there was no need to worry.

Al Qaeda in Iraq used this to their advantage and began to strap children into their car bombs to use as decoys to evade the profile. <sup>(19)</sup>

Female operatives are especially useful when the groups target civilians and other “soft targets.” When the terrorists want to kill civilians, what better choice than an operative who resembles the target? Women more easily access markets and restaurants where they kill scores of civilians. Recent attacks by Boko Haram at Global Cell Phone markets or the Chicken Market in Yobe and Borno states provide an illustration of this dynamic. Not only did the terrorist organization use women, but also very young girls aged 10-12.

In South Asia, women actively participated in the fight for Tamil Independence as part of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In 1987 the Tamil Tigers created separate units for women led by women. While many people incorrectly assume that the LTTE invented female suicide bombing, the reality is that they improved the technique to create the perfect stealth weapon. Female bombers have managed to kill several Presidents and Prime Ministers and using women allowed the armed group to get up close and personal with the target, again because they can get access to the target. (20)

In 1991, Thenmuli Rajaratnam code-named Dhanu (aka Gayatri) was selected to kill former Indian Prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi. As Gandhi was campaigning for reelection in Tamil Nadu, the LTTE sent Dhanu to an election rally with a garland of flowers. As former Prime Minister Gandhi bent down to accept the offering, she detonated 700 grams of explosives strapped around her waist, killing herself, Gandhi and eight others, including the photographer who captured the scene.(21)

This assassination was a turning point for the LTTE. It was significant not just because the attack killed a major political figure, but also because the perpetrator was a woman. Women proved to be indispensable to the LTTE and comprised as much as 30% of the total number of suicide attackers from 1991-2007.(22) Women also formed specific attack units that were highly successful on the battlefield(23) including the all female tank unit able to rout the Sri Lankan military on a regular basis for example, the Battle for Elephant pass.

While women in the LTTE initially appeared to join voluntarily, journalistic reports have emerged in which several women admitted to being mobilized and recruited coercively sometimes at the behest of family members or as the result of gender based violence. In this respect, the recruitment process mirrors that of the Jihadi Salafi groups who found new and innovative ways to exploit women. While the secular or left-wing groups may welcome women as front-line soldiers or suicide bombers, Jihadi groups have included a wider variation of women’s involvement.

Diverse groups such as al Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria and Hamas have used women to devastating effect in the past two decades. While the total percentage of female to male suicide bombers never exceeds 30% (except for the LTTE and Chechen Black Widows)(24) women are able to accomplish tasks as operatives that men cannot.

To understand female suicide bombers we need to examine the phenomenon from two perspectives: one from the vantage point of the terrorist group and the other from the women themselves. For terrorist organizations, there are enormous benefits to using female operatives and especially female suicide bombers.

Extremist groups tend to use women on the front lines at specific periods during conflicts. As explained, women are better at avoiding detection and better able to penetrate checkpoints. During the course of an anti-terrorist campaign, it becomes increasingly difficult for men to travel, pass through checkpoints or reach their intended targets. Security personnel, police and counter-terrorism professionals create profiles to help preempt bombers and make it impossible to succeed in their mission.(25) The organizations are cognizant that stereotypes exist and adjust the kinds of tactics and operatives accordingly. During the course of research conducted on mapping the adaptation of terrorist networks to counter terrorism (CT) strategies, we determined that the terrorists pay close attention to the policies and tactics employed by the police and security personnel. If the police have a specific profile, the groups alter their operatives to fall under the radar screen. If a standard operating procedure is put into place, terrorists adapt at a far faster pace unencumbered by bloated bureaucracies that make changing police or military procedures time consuming and difficult.(26) Because of existing stereotypes about the inherent peacefulness of women, CT officials, and security personnel have been glacially slow to adapt and consider that women might be involved in militant activities.

Put simply, extremist groups use the stereotypes of their targets. Nobody expects the bomber to be a

woman. Because soldiers in Iraq in 2006 were instructed that invasively searching women was a cultural faux pas and would cause great offence to the local Iraqi population. Iraqi militant groups and terrorists like Abu Musab al Zarqawi identified a tactical advantage. Groups like Ansar al Sunnah and Al Qaeda in Iraq started to send women to deliver bombs to civilian targets. Women can penetrate a target more deeply and gain better access. While a male operative might be stopped at the entrance, a woman will usually be able to get to the back of the room.<sup>(27)</sup> This allows small amounts of explosive to have the destructive capability of larger bombs.

In talking with terrorist leaders over the past several years, they expressed a belief that women are less capable fighters on the battlefield but may be better able at killing civilians because they blend in with the target.<sup>(28)</sup> Over the years, terrorist leaders have relayed to me that they believed that the women were 'more expendable' than men. They found it easier to manipulate women to become bombers. Understanding the social pressures, they knew that women would want to prove their dedication to the men of the community and show that they were just as fierce as their brothers, fathers and sons.

Terrorist groups understand the public relations benefit of deploying female bombers. During the course of my research about women and terrorism I observed a pattern that when terrorist groups used female operatives, they garnered significantly more media and press attention for the story.<sup>(29)</sup> The result could be as much as 8 times as many stories compared to when the groups use a male bomber. Because publicity and the media are the lifeblood of terrorism, this is a huge benefit women bring to terrorist organizations. Extremist groups likewise understand Western gender stereotypes as well as those that exist within their own cultures. When the extremist organizations face challenges in recruitment, using a woman will goad more men into participating. The groups are able to shame men into joining the cause because failure to do so may make the men appear weak and unmanly by allowing women to do their job. <sup>(30)</sup>

This has been punctuated in the women's last will and testament martyrdom videos,<sup>(31)</sup> in which female suicide bombers have made the point of saying that they are stepping forward to carry out the martyrdom operation (which they call 'amalyat ishtishadiyya') because the men are unwilling and not man enough to do it themselves.

Finally, female suicide bombers are able to do something that a man could not easily accomplish, to disguise the bomb as late term pregnancy. Anoja Kugenthirarsah was tasked with killing the chief of the Sri Lanka military in charge of the government's campaign against the Tamil Tigers. For several weeks prior to the attack she visited the maternity clinic at the military hospital in order to establish an alibi that she was in fact pregnant and make sure the sentry guards at the gate knew her. After three weeks she was ready.<sup>(32)</sup> As General Sarath Fonseka's limousine approached the entrance she waited with her suicide belt strapped around her waist and detonated her explosive. She failed to kill Fonseka but killed several of his aides and herself in the process.

While several groups engaged women on the front lines as fighters and bombers, many of the more traditional Jihadi Salafi groups tended to hold back on tapping 50% of the population. In the past ten years, women have been increasingly involved in terrorism via new technologies such as the Internet and recently, social media. In the 1990s, most al Qaeda training camps required relocation to Afghanistan or the Sudan. The emergence of the Internet allowed people to become radicalized in the comfort of their own homes and with a click of the mouse. Supporters of al Qaeda, ISIS and other terrorist groups now meet on the Internet, in password protected chat rooms and on social media. There are cases of women using these forums to goad men into action. Women have used their gender to imply, if you were a REAL man, you would go to Iraq and fight the Jihad.

Women, the Internet and social media

Women on the Internet and social media have now become a crucial element in the recruitment of foreign fighters going to Syria or to inspire homegrown lone actor attacks within North America. When a woman from Pennsburg, Pennsylvania, Colleen La Rose was arrested in October 2009, the reaction to a blonde convert was one of shock and surprise.<sup>(33)</sup> Online her nom de guerre was 'Jihad Jane' and she was arrested and found guilty for planning to kill Danish cartoonist Lars Vilks for mocking the Prophet Mohammed. La Rose did not

fit the conventional profile of an Al Qaeda terrorist operative – she was white, from Michigan and had no known connections to violent extremism. She converted to Islam in 2005 and via the Internet, La Rose plotted to kill Lars Vilks with her friend Jamie Paulin-Ramirez (Jihad Jamie) and six other co-conspirators. Vilks remained on Al Qaeda's most wanted list (along with Charlie Hebdo cartoonists and Ayaan Hirsi)(34) and was the target of the attack in Denmark in January 2015 when an ISIS inspired supporter attempted to finish off the job.

Women online and on social media have provided a platform for Jihadi messages or venues for posting videos and other audio-visual propaganda in the service of terrorism. In Belgium, Malika El Aroud created a website,(35) Min Bar - SOS, dedicated to inciting her readers to join the Global Jihad.(36) Aroud's first husband was the first suicide bomber in Afghanistan and killed Ahmed Shah Masood, the leader of the Afghan Northern Alliance two days before 9/11. Being the wife of a martyr transformed Aroud into one of the most prominent female jihadists in Europe. She used her fame and notoriety to goad "Muslim men to go and fight" and rally "women to join the cause" on her website. Aroud's transformation set the tone for other women who followed a similar trajectory first as wife and then as source of emulation. The wife of 7/7 bomber Jermaine Lindsay, Samantha Lewthwaite became known as the White Widow when in the aftermath of his death she joined al Shabaab and recruited for the Global Jihad. The transformation from wife to heroine has been a powerful lure for women and explains how ISIS is both able to convince Western women to join the Islamic State and cast the benefits of being a martyrs' wife.

#### Redemption, Revenge, Respect, Relationship and Rape

To explain women's motivation, we can summarize the phenomenon as the five R's. Redemption, Revenge, Respect, Relationship and Rape. While it should be stressed that women are motivated by multiple sources and overlapping reasons, there are not significant differences between what motivates men versus women in joining extremist organizations. It is equally important to stress the fact that the conventional wisdom that portrays women as motivated by emotion while men are motivated by politics, religion or nationalism has established a false dichotomy. The reality is far more complex and in fact women and men are all motivated by a combination of reasons, some personal and some political although perhaps in different percentages or at different times.

It is often alleged that any woman involved in terrorism has done so for personal reasons. A conventional wisdom among scholars of terrorism is that women who become suicide bombers are seeking to redeem themselves through an act of martyrdom. If a woman has something shameful in her past for which she needs to atone, this singular action will clear the slate and anything that transpired before is forgotten. The only thing that people will remember about the woman is that she was a martyr for the cause. Another equally popular explanation for women's involvement has been that women are seeking revenge for the loss of loved ones. Chechen female suicide bombers are alleged to have lost fathers, brothers and sons during several wars with Russia since 1999. The Russian authorities have christened them 'Black Widows' although a detailed examination of women in Chechnya and Dagestan who have perpetrated acts of suicide terrorism include several who were unmarried or were radicalized well before the death of a loved one. Furthermore, Chechen women have tended to join Imirat Kavkaz in groups and while the loss of loved ones may contribute to their personal motivations to become involved, after two Chechen wars one would be hard pressed to find women who have not been affected in one way or another. The loss of a loved one may be a necessary though insufficient explanation. By this same token, many of the male suicide bombers have also lost loved ones (sons, brothers, fathers or female family members). One is struck by the fact that Chechen bombers (like Irish militants and activists) have often joined as part of family units and history is replete with siblings acting in concert or in coordinated attacks.

There is a view that women seek the respect of their peers. Through violence, women can show that they are just as dedicated to the cause. Although this perspective is most often argued by Feminist scholars research has shown that few women involved in terrorist movements consider themselves to be Feminists.

The R the best predicts a women's involvement in political violence is "relationship." In particular if a woman has a male relative who is already a member of the group, this exponentially increases the likelihood that she will be welcomed into the organization. In many contexts involvement in terrorism becomes the family

business. Involving members of the same family is also the best way for terrorist groups to prevent infiltration and ensure that a new recruit is not an informer. A woman whose family member is also a member, is less likely to change her mind at the last moment for fear of causing embarrassment or disappointment within her kinship network.

Although many women have joined terrorist groups for a variety of political and personal reasons, in the past few years another major reason has emerged.

Rape. Women have been vulnerable to sexual exploitation or attack especially at checkpoints or during nighttime search and seizures of their homes. When women are raped in traditional and patriarchal societies, they are subject to existing honor codes, which hold women responsible for their sexual propriety and blame women who have shamed their families for having been raped. Terrorist organizations provide a haven for these women. By becoming a suicide bomber, the shame of rape disappears and is replaced by the pride associated with being a martyr for the cause.<sup>(37)</sup>

While historically, the women were raped by soldiers on the other side, the terrorist organizations are increasingly raping the women or arranging for women to be raped. In Iraq, Samira Ahmed Jassim is alleged to have orchestrated the rape of 80 women to turn them into suicide bombers for Ansar al Sunnah, an offshoot of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) the precursor group to ISIS.<sup>(38)</sup>

Several cultures around the world extol the virtues of martyrdom and self-sacrifice. These cultures of martyrdom exist in Islamic societies and in Tamil society - although in a secular form (self gift or thatkodai).<sup>(39)</sup> Teenagers and youth in contexts that laud martyrdom will idolize famous suicide bombers. Parks, squares and streets are named after the deadliest bombers.<sup>(40)</sup> The appreciation for violence has perverse effects on young people whose priorities and role models are distorted in favor of violent terrorists. Specifically, such cultures of martyrdom convey an insidious message to women, they can accomplish more with their death than they ever could with their lives. One such example comes from Iraq when a fifteen-year-old girl, Raniya Mutleg told her family she wanted to become a doctor. They scoffed at this goal and explained it was unlikely that she would grow up to be a doctor but certainly she could become a martyr.<sup>(41)</sup> She was preempted by Iraqi National Police en route to a Shi'a girls' school before she could detonate the explosive device strapped around her midsection.

In a variety of settings and across several regions, women who sacrifice their lives are celebrated. In Belfast, murals on the Falls Road depict Mairead Farrell, the leader of the women in Armagh prison as a heroine. In Palestine, Ayat al Akras, a Palestinian bomber is immortalized. Wafa Idris, the first Palestinian suicide bomber has graced the cover of Time magazine, was the subject of a series of novellas about her life and her image is emblazoned on posters and pamphlets. According to one watchdog organization, there is even a training camp for young girls named after her.<sup>(42)</sup>

By being a bomber she transformed herself from being a source of shame to her family (her husband divorced her after she could not bear children) to a source of great admiration in the community. In Sri Lanka, the Tigers have a museum dedicated to their memory.

While we are familiar with the male face of terror, there are new faces primed to take their place. The face of yesterday was Bin Laden's, today it is perhaps Samira Ahmed Jassim, and tomorrow, who knows, we are seeing more and more children manipulated into becoming violent extremists. This is an insidious form of child abuse and as we move into the future, we should know that the face of terror always changes.

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