

# Women in Terrorism

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is the act of unlawful violence done by a gathering of individuals to accomplish certain objectives or to create terror of themselves or a party amongst the people. Of the numerous things that astonish and shock us about terrorism and ISIS specifically, the inclusion of ladies in such a crime is one of the most poignant. Most of us have the sense that women are Gentler Sex, the Nurturers, and the Protectors with stereotypical thinking about women's capabilities and motivations. Whenever the topic of terrorism arises, the role of men is always discussed and the involvement of women terrorists is rarely chewed over. The security and the anti terrorist practices set forward by governments and other security associations have always been centered on the viewpoint that a man would perform a terrorist attack; the probability of a lady performing such tasks has been very low. But now governments and security details have been caught off guard as there is an increase of women carrying out an attack. Women have increasingly engaged in doing suicide bombings, hijacking air-planes, and taking hostages in places such as Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, and Chechnya. Mainly female participation is seen in terrorist organizations that are Al-Qaeda, The Black Widows, Hamas, and The Tamil Tigers, Boko Haram and ISIS.<sup>1</sup> While women have long been a part of brutal extremist groups around the globe, the extent joining ISIS from abroad, including the US is also strikingly high. Among ISIS members who have come to the Middle East from Europe, roughly **one in five** is female.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of stereotypes about their domesticity and passivity, ladies are attracted to groups like the Islamic State by a large number of forces same as men: adventure, inequality, empowerment, alienation and the pull of the cause. ISIS' women account for approximately 20 to 30% of ISIS membership. The average age is under 25 years old. In terms of the total Western foreign fighters, women constitute 20%, and their number is between 550 and 2500. 40% of French recruits for ISIS are female, and this number represented 220 women in 2015. In 2016, at least 60 women left from the UK to join ISIS. These numbers would not be as threatening as they are currently on the rise.<sup>3</sup> Given the globalization of terror from non state actors, experts believe that suicide bombings, which will include female suicide bombers, will increase. Suicide attacks remain one of the most effective tools available to terrorist organizations to achieve their objectives. In 2017, 348 suicide attacks were carried out in

<sup>1</sup> Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005)

<sup>2</sup> Heather Hurlburt, Jacqueline O'Neill, *We need to think harder about terrorism and gender. ISIS already is.*, VOX MEDIA (Jan 28, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/6/1/15722746/terrorism-gender-women-manchester-isis-counterterrorism>

<sup>3</sup> *The Top 5 Countries Where ISIS Gets Its Foreign Recruits*Time, <http://time.com/4739488/isis-iraq-syria-tunisia-saudi-arabia-russia>

23 countries throughout the world by some 623 terrorists. This is the lowest number of suicide attacks since 2013. Approximately 4,310 people were killed and 6,700 people wounded in suicide attacks in 2017, and as in previous years, the Islamic State was the leading source of these attacks. Of those committing suicide attacks, 137 were women and girls – the highest number of female suicide bombers since women began participating in suicide attacks<sup>4</sup>

It is indisputable that using women suicide bombers can at times give a strategic benefit for terrorist groups in the launch of their attack. Suicide attacks are done not only to instil fear and inflict damage upon a group of people but also to garner attention for a particular cause. Women have become the ideal stealth weapons for terrorist groups. They are less expected to be suspected or investigated and, as a result, have been used to hit at the heart of alliance troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## II. BACKGROUND

Women's involvement in political violence is not a recent phenomenon. History is replete with examples of women and terrorism. Women were among the first to join terrorist movements and, in fact, the very first person tried in a court of law for terrorism was Vera Zasulich, an anarchist for Narodnaya Volya, the People's Will, in Russia (Siljak, 2008). Over time, women became more and more involved in such activities likewise fulfilled many roles both supportive and operational. Women provided important support, but a handful of them engaged in frontline activities like hijackings and ordinance planting. The SSNP's (Syrian Social Nationalist Party) tactical use of women differed from the car bombs used to attack stationary targets. The women of the SSNP provided a template for other women to become involved in Middle Eastern groups engaged in terrorist attacks. According to some terrorism analysts, the popularity of suicide bombing in Lebanon led to its adoption in other parts of the globe.

In Palestinian areas, suicide bombers are referred to as martyrs—*shahids*—and considered heroes within the community. These operatives are even more popular than the heroic figures of the past (e.g., Khaled and Mughrabi) because of the enormous publicity that their attacks generate. Hundreds of people attend their funerals, and their families receive congratulations rather than condolences. The notion that women are equal to men in jihad has been gaining ground over the past decade, including in ideologies from both Sunni and Shi'a traditions. Azzam issued a fatwa in 1979, which stated that women (and children) are required to participate in jihad as an individual obligation to defend "Muslim lands." Despite Azzam's support, (Al-Qaeda) Al Qaeda's

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<sup>4</sup> Aviad Mendelboim & Yoram Schweitzer, *Report on Suicide Attacks in 2017: Fewer Attacks, More Women Bombers*, INSS, (Jan 6, 2019) <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/report-suicide-attacks-2017-fewer-attacks-women>

core leadership had previously done little to encourage female participation in the battlefield, focusing instead on their role as fundraisers and supporters of the mujahideen (Azzam).<sup>5</sup>

The extent of ladies serving in the police and military is very less. Terrorist groups have transformed this into a strategic favourable policy. Also they are secured eight times as much media coverage as that of their male counterparts. From Sri Lanka to Chechnya, groups have relied on the ability of ladies to move free of doubt or investigation.<sup>6</sup> In Pakistan, for instance, women make up less than 1 percent of the police.<sup>7</sup> A year ago, militants kidnapped the son of a Pakistani Supreme Court judge. They attempted to drive over the border with him hidden in a burqa, since they knew two things: Only a woman can search another woman, and the likelihood of experiencing a female cop at a checkpoint was minimal. The police lucked out: One woman was on job and the kidnappers were caught.<sup>8</sup>

*Some of the deadliest female terrorists of the history are:-*

**Sanan'a Mehaydali**, a 17-year-old member of the Syrian Socialist Party (SSNP/PPS), a pro-Syrian Lebanese organization, is believed to have been the first female suicide bomber. On April 9, 1985, she blew up herself and a truck of explosives next to an Israeli convoy in Lebanon during the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon killing more than 5 Israeli soldiers.

**Samantha Louise Lewthwaite**, also known as **White Widow**, is a British woman who is one of the Western world's most wanted terrorism suspects. She is indicted of causing the demise of more than 400 people. She was charged of arranging grenade attacks at non-Muslim places of worship, and is alleged to have been behind an attack on the people watching football in a bar in Mombasa during Euro 2012.

**Dzhanet Abdulayeva and Maryam Sharipova, Russia**, These two women from the Russian region of Dagestan detonated themselves on the Moscow underground system on 29 March 2010. The attacks were claimed by Chechen Islamists. The two women were dubbed the "**Black Widows**".

**Reem Saleh Riyashi** was a Palestinian mother of two from Gaza City who executed herself and four Israelis at the Erez crossing on January 14, 2004 in a suicide bombing attack. She went through a security check by claiming to have metal plates inserted in her legs.

**Thenmozhi Rajaratnam**, a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), carried out a suicide bombing that killed Rajiv Gandhi, on 21 May 1991. At least 14 others were also killed<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> Jessica Stern, "When Bombers are Women" THE WASHINGTON POST, (December 18, 2003)

<sup>7</sup> Supra Note 5

<sup>8</sup> Supra Note 2

<sup>9</sup> *Rajiv Gandhi's assassination: 27 years on, probe still not complete*, TOI, (May 21, 2018),

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/rajiv-gandhis-assassination-27-years-on-probe-still-not-complete/articleshow/64259965.cms>

**The terror threat of Black Widows Suicide Bombers:** the very first suicide bombing in Russia was carried out by two young Chechen women named Khava Barayeva and Luiza Magomedova. These young women drove a truck packed with explosives into a Russian Special Forces base in Alkhan Yurt, Chechnya, levelling it and killing as many as twenty-seven troops on June 7, 2000. The second female suicide bomber attack came in November 2001 and was carried out by Elza Gazuyeva, targeting the Russian officer she blamed for the death of her husband.<sup>10</sup> Their most famous terror attack was the involvement of nineteen Chechen women terrorists in the seizure of the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow during the performance of a play in October of 2002.<sup>11</sup> In 2003 two Black Widows blew themselves and sixteen other people up trying to kill the pro-Russian head of the conquered Chechen Republic<sup>12</sup>. Despite their actual focus, the Black Widows have shown themselves to be ruthless killers in recent years and have murdered several regular citizens in their suicide attacks.

The number of females carrying out terrorist attacks is escalating drastically and the time has come to move away with the general superstition about women. In 2016, a cell of radicalised French women planned an attack outside Notre Dame Cathedral.<sup>13</sup> In September 2016, Kenyan police shot dead three women wearing burqas after they launched a knife attack at a police station in Mombasa.<sup>14</sup> In August 2017, three British women were charged with involvement in ‘an active terror plot’, believed to involve a planned knife attack in Westminster. More recently, in the fight for Mosul, 38 women carried out suicide missions against Iraqi forces and civilian targets.<sup>15</sup> With the fall of the city, 16 women were arrested. Finally, this month’s attacks in Indonesia underscore the fact that Islamist terrorism is not just about men. Women were among the bombers in Surabaya.

### III. WHY WOMEN

The female's sexuality plays an important role in the group dynamics and does alter the nature of terrorism itself. The rise of women as suicide terrorists did not happen instantly, but women arrived onto the stage of conflict in successive waves. Many terrorist organizations need community support and women work as sympathizers for them playing a crucial role in giving support at times of need. Women also often play the role of spies as they are generally not expected to gather information and therefore are less suspected and granted access to more resources as compared to men. This is of course kept in mind while recruiting women.

For terror groups, the uncommon status of women in Saudi society gave them a unique opportunity to use them. As women typically wore black veils over their faces, no one would have the capacity to approach them to

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<sup>10</sup> *The Brides of Allah: The Terror Threat of Black-Widow Suicide Bombers to the Winter Olympics*, THE HUFFINGTON POST, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-glyn-williams/the-brides-of-allah-the-t\\_b\\_4761027.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-glyn-williams/the-brides-of-allah-the-t_b_4761027.html)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *Supra* Note 10

<sup>13</sup> *Supra* Note 10

<sup>14</sup> *The role of women in Islamic State-led terrorism*, THE STRATEGIST, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/role-women-islamic-state-led-terrorism> (last visited Jan 6, 2019)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

confirm their identity. Furthermore, their loose-fitting black Abayas were ideal for hiding explosive belts and small weapons without being found.

Many of today's terrorist groups are building direct associations with ladies, who are frequently drawn into groups because they are in critical needs. At the point when there is no other support left for basics like water or food, and women can get that support only from a terror group, they take it and get drawn in, counter-terrorism projects are in danger of failing to see this, and that women's involvement in terror is not always political. Sometimes, it's the simple fact that they need to feed their children. Recently, terrorist groups have begun utilising the internet and the media to spread fear and influence public opinion. The new technology enables women to partake in radical chat forums, read extremist propaganda, find like-minded friends, and meet men. The Islamic State uses the internet to recruit followers. The Islamic State uses the internet to recruit followers. Approaching other women in person or through social media, they state that Muslim women are seen in the West solely as victims, supposedly exploited by their own communities and scoffed at by those outside them. Photos circulate depicting mass rape of Muslim women in Srebrenica, and attacks by Israelis on Palestinian children.<sup>16</sup> Hijab-wearing women are told they'll never escape the label of terrorist so long as they remain in North America or Europe. An alternative way of joining extremist groups, that women are solely victims of brainwashing and are usually married into such groups. A survey conducted by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs discovered that 53.26 per cent women's involvement with terrorist groups was societal, 32.4 per cent was ideological and 16.33 per cent was emotional.

The transformation from a minor role to a more dangerous active participation of women in terrorist groups is evident from the fact that change has also occurred in the domestic and internal levels prompting women to leave behind their conventional roles. It can also be hard for women and girls who had been confined by terrorists to return to their ordinary means of life.

#### **IV. KEY MOTIVATING FACTORS FOR WOMEN TO JOIN TERRORIST GROUPS**

Contribution of women in terrorism is a subject that requires a top to bottom examination, particularly as far as their inspiration and drive to join terrorist groups. To understand whether a woman joined a terrorist organization, one must first consider if she was forced to join a terrorist organization or if she joined on her own free will.

Depending on what was happening at the time, when women tended to end up in circumstances which they considered to be miserable for them to adapt, it could be because of the political circumstance in the nation, yet it could also have been expected due to the social and religious aspects which made it hard for the women to

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<sup>16</sup> Supra Note 2

have a say in what concerned them. A wide range of factors combined together drive the women to go into a deal with outside powers which could have had a tremendous and terrific impact on her life and the life around them.

The reasons and motivation why women participate in violence and engage in terrorism will vary from woman to woman. For ex- Russians in Chenchnya believed that the female suicide attackers were the widows seeking vengeance. European women in the Islamic State have spoken of how alienation and restrictions on their religious practices back home, like France's ban on wearing burqas in public, helped push them into the group.

Religious terrorism is a compelling form of violent behaviour as religion offers the moral validation for committing apparently immoral acts. Many Women became suicide bombers in pursuit of glory, the forgiveness of individual sins, and in hopes of attaining paradise. For example for the Palestinians, there is a notion that they can die at any moment from aerial bombardment or a stray bullet. Becoming a bomber might in some ways empower the individual to feel that they choose the time and place of their death. They are referred to as martyrs' **shahids** and considered heroes within the community.

There is likewise, a money related inspiration, as suicide bombers are guaranteed that their families will be tangibly accommodated after their death.

Fauziya Abdi Ali, the president of the organisation Women in International Security Kenya, who worked on the UNDP Journey to Extremism report, argued that many women join terror groups because they lack essential services such as access to water and electricity.<sup>17</sup>

The notion that women are equal to men in jihad has been gaining ground over the past decade, including in ideologies from both Sunni and Shi'a traditions. Like his wife, Azzam appeals all Muslim women to join Mujahideen( engaged in Jihad). In order to show their empowerment and claim that women are nowhere lacking behind in Jihad, women tend to join such terrorist groups, to prove that they are equal to men as they say "jihad is not a man-only duty. Women must do their part as well"

Many women have the motive of Revenge. The passing of a relative, for example, the death of a youngster, a parent, or a life partner was the primary reason and inspiration for a woman when the choice of joining a terrorist group was made. By joining an association, for example, a terror group gave the woman a method of revenge on the individuals who had taken away the things she held close to her heart and had adored. For example the Black Widows of Russia as mentioned above.

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<sup>17</sup> *On the frontline: women and terrorism Global Government Forum*, <https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/frontline-women-terrorism>

Rape has also become a weapon which has increased in conflicts. Women subjected to rape by terrorist followers have increased, evidence from Iraq and Chechnya show women being raped and later forced to join a terrorist group in order to regain the dignity they lost. Sexual violence is used a lot as an approach to terrorise or intimidate pressurize women, particularly in Nigeria, Syria and Afghanistan.

The increased publicity surrounding female involvement is also likely to draw other individuals to the organization.

Another key factor motivating the women to indulge in such perilous acts are their connections and their relationships. Connections help propel women into joining a terrorist association, as the partner who takes part in terrorist violence is usually the part of a terrorist insurgent group himself. The chances of a women being included in such groups are higher if her relative was or is already a part of a militant association.

Similar to women's involvement, children are rarely seen as a threat, which again increases their ability to get into more restricted or guarded places than male operatives. Children who are raised in this condition seek death, and their parents won't prevent them from joining terrorist groups. Indonesia is still in a state of shock after a horrifying series of terrorist attacks across the country last week (May 2018) where the question is not about male or female, here the whole family was involved in the attack. In East Java, members of three pro-ISIS families tried to carry out separate but coordinated suicide bombings.<sup>18</sup> One family of six split up and attacked three churches. All of the bombers the mother, father, two teenage sons and two daughters, ages 9 and 12 were killed, together with 12 churchgoers.

## V. CONCLUSION

Society has had a troublesome time understanding what inspires women to confer brutal acts, particularly when those acts are done in public manner and affect a large number of individuals. Women have always been a part of terrorist groups regardless of whether they function as coordinators, organizers, suicide bombers or strategic thinkers. Women terrorists are often used to courier ash and weapons to different militant groups. They can likewise provide shelter and medical assistance to their terrorist colleagues and at times even act as a decoy to divert security officers while executing their terrorist operations. Women's roles in modern terrorism have expanded from merely playing a supporting role into becoming a major player and their involvement in terrorist activities is likely to increase in the future. Women join radical terrorist groups that promote violence for a combination of personal and political reasons. At a personal level, women became suicide bombers in pursuit of glory, the forgiveness of individual sins, and in hopes of attaining paradise. There is also, a financial

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<sup>18</sup> *Family Suicide Attacks: Indonesia Must Deradicalize Mothers And Kids Too* NPR, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/05/24/613383263/family-suicide-attacks-indonesia-must-deradicalize-mothers-and-kids-too>

motivation, as suicide bombers are assured that their families will be materially provided for after their death. The idea of women encouraging their children to become martyrs and becoming martyrs themselves despite being mothers is not unique to Islam. Terrorist organizations are increasing their involvement of such women, both operationally and logistically, within their organizations without any specification of age, even the girls aged 16 are seen in such groups<sup>19</sup> There is no doubt that woman terrorists have been highly effective in slipping through checkpoints more easily, getting closer to their targets than men, and able to hide weapons or suicide belts under their clothing. Prominent bombings completed by women are an approach to amplify the effect, since individuals tend to find the idea of a woman being behind a brutal killing so much more horrific and "unnatural". Organizations such as ISIS, Al Qaeda and Hamas have noted that women need to be involved in jihad and must do their part. As long as terrorist organizations are able to use female members, they will continue to do so. And, given that they are successful, the number of women involved will increase. So long as women remain 'cost effective', they will be recruited into terrorist organizations.

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<sup>19</sup> *Why Do Women Become Terrorists?*, THE DAILY BEAST, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-do-women-become-terrorists>