TRENDS WORKING PAPER 03/2015

The following paper was produced by the author as part of the Inside the Mind of a Jihadist seminar, May 2015.

Female Terrorists in ISIS, Al Qaeda and 21rst Century Terrorism

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Trend is a Man’s Game

Terrorism is a male dominated field. Women’s participation in terrorist groups varies from being completely blocked from participation to thirty-percent of membership in some groups. Even when women do manage to break in, they are often limited in the roles they are allowed to carry out and they rarely gain entry to leadership positions. In terrorist groups the men are generally in charge and terrorism is a man’s game. This paper examines the roles of women in ISIS, al Qaeda and other 21st century terrorist groups.

The Myth: Women are Not Violent

In considering the roles that women take as terrorists and how terrorist groups can benefit by using females we must first reconsider a very widely held societal myth—that women are not violent. Women in nearly every society are venerated as gentle nurturers, mothers and intimate partners. Few like to admit that women can be—and often are—violent.

The facts however tell a different story. Looking at U.S. national survey data dating back to the 1975 National Family Violence Survey by sociologists Murray Straus and Richard Gelles, for instance, shows that women are just as likely as men to report hitting a spouse, and men are just as likely as women, to report getting hit. And these were not acts of self-defense—women were just as likely as men in this survey to initiate violence, a finding confirmed in many other studies of intimate partner violence carried out in the decades since. And the motives for intimate partner violence carried out by women and men are the same—anger and a desire to coercively control one’s partner. Likewise, men make up thirty percent of intimate homicide victims—after omitting those carried out by women acting in self-defense. Clearly women—at least American women who have been carefully studied over the last three decades—are capable of carrying out violence—whether we like to admit it or not. It is also likely American women are similar to women around the world—that these data are not unique findings.

Research showing that women are often aggressors is a scary statistic that many don’t like to acknowledge.

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Accepting that women can be violent does not explain how they become so, particularly in the terrorist context. But facing the societal myth that we don’t want to acknowledge the violence of women does explain how terrifying female terrorist violence can be—because it breaks through widely held stereotypes of who women are and of what they are capable. Just as we know that women in fact can be violent, we also know that women join terrorist groups when allowed in and they often beg to and actually do—carry out highly lethal and violent acts.

The Lethal Cocktail of Terrorism

In my years of interviewing over four hundred terrorists, their family members, close associates and hostages I have had the opportunity to learn about the female trajectories into terrorism. The elements involved are similar to the men’s in that the lethal cocktail of terrorism nearly always involves 1) a group that has a political aim for which it is willing to use terrorism, 2) an ideology that wrongly argues that terrorism is justified and called for, 3) social support for terrorism—which nowadays is readily available via the Internet if it is not also available in person and 4) all of these interacting with the vulnerabilities and motivations of the individual which differ mostly by whether he or she resides within or outside of a conflict zone. Inside conflict zones, the motivations for males and females are almost always primarily revenge and trauma driven although many other factors can also play in. Females inside conflict zones, as well as males, may want to express community outrage over the senseless killing of civilians, especially children. Outside conflict zones motivations derive from feelings of discrimination, marginalization, frustrated aspirations, a desire to be heroic, to escape a dreary home or work life, to overcome shame, to find a purpose, to belong, for personal significance, life meaning, adventure and even romance. And if the traumas playing out in the conflict zones have been transmitted to the non-conflict zones via graphic video and imagery, females especially can suffer secondary traumatization and want to act—especially if they feel a relationship of “fictive kin” with those who are suffering, as in the Muslim ummah for instance.

Female Terrorism & Media Amplification

From the terrorist group perspective the societal wide horror created by viewing the violence of a female terrorist can be very useful in terms of media amplification, and media attention is what most terrorist groups crave. Female terrorists generally cause much more speculation of why a woman would carry out a violent act in behalf of a terrorist group bringing much more media attention to their cause. This was certainly the case for the Chechen terrorists who took over the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow for what became known as the Nord Ost hostage taking in October 2002. In that event the twenty women who took part, along with twenty males, were dressed in long black Salafi robes and headscarves that were later misinterpreted by the press as widows in mourning. The Chechen female terrorists were dubbed “black widows” and immediately worldwide speculation, pity for them and fascination occurred over their three day siege of holding eight hundred theater-goers hostage. On a film released by the terrorists to al Jazeera, a young Chechen woman told the camera “‘Even if we are killed, thousands of brothers and sisters will come after us, ready to sacrifice themselves.”

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When Palestinian groups allowed females to join the ranks of suicide bombers, these too caused a huge media stir. The public in Israel and indeed the world over was shocked to find that the terrorist cause was not limited to Palestinian militant men, but that young women were also willing to don suicide belts (and backpacks) to go into Israel and detonate themselves. The shock increased even more when it was learned that one of these female terrorists was a lawyer and a mother of two. It seemed inconceivable that the bearers of life could also bear bombs to take innocent civilian life. Many commented that the conflict in Israel has escalated to the point where women and children were killing women and children.\(^5\)

Terrorism is in large part a psychological weapon. Therefore groups that use women as operatives—particularly as suicide terrorists can count on the media amplification from the attack to reach far wider than the actual victims of the attack—terrifying a much wider witnessing audience.

**Terrorist Group Reasons to Use Female Operatives**

Clearly there are advantages to using female terrorists. As mentioned above, they garner media attention much more than male terrorist do—fascinating us with their use of violence. Likewise women are better able to hide bombs, messages, money and contraband on their person than men are. Palestinian and Tamil Tiger female operatives have pretended to be pregnant when really carrying bombs and the Tamil Tiger’s even devised a female suicide bra in which the explosives were placed in the cups and the detonator wire ran along the place of a usual underwire bra. Women can often engender trust more easily than a man at checkpoints and may as a result not be checked as thoroughly as a man. Modesty constraints may also interfere with security protocols particularly if it is males doing the checking.

Sometimes terrorists strategically marry females in order to create alliances as Chechen terrorist leader Basaev did so he could call upon family and clan loyalties when his cadres needed to hide out or assistance.\(^6\) Likewise marriages and recruitment to the terrorist cause can secure documents for gaining citizenship, to travel or live in country as Abid Khan talked about doing in regard to the Toronto 18,\(^7\) and Belgian Muriel Degauque provided for her husband. Many unmarried female and male terrorist pairs have also posed as couples while going on suicide operations (as did Palestinians) or in earlier days as did Laila Khalid when attempting to hijack a plane with her male terrorist counterpart. While there are many concerns for a terrorist group in regard to using female cadres (discussed below) another clear advantage for the men is sexual companionship provided by female cadres as well as all the home-making roles, nursing, cooking and so on that women may provide.

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Restraints on the Use of Female Terrorists

Terrorists groups are very sensitive to the contexts in which they operate and to social support for their actions that effect both recruitment and funding. Terror groups generally do not use women if the social context in which they operate does not support it unless circumstances become so difficult as to demand the use of women. For instance when a terrorist group faces heightened security measures they may find that resorting to using female operatives—particularly for suicide missions is necessary because the males can no longer pass through security checkpoints whereas females can. If using females is frowned upon in their context they at that point face a tough decision—to move ahead and equip women as terrorists and risk social backlash from their community or fail to breach the enemy’s security.

In the case of the Palestinians, when their first suicide bomber Wafa Idris detonated herself, Fatah, the group that sent her did not claim responsibility for sending her for several days, nor had they prepared a “martyr’s” video because they so feared public opinion. However when Wafa’s act was greeted throughout the Arab world with praise they proudly claimed her. Poems and eulogies were written to Idris, and shortly after her death fatwas were declared that opened the gates to Palestinian women to take part in the cause. This however did not end the reticence of some Palestinian groups to use women. For instance in the author’s interview with a sender from the Al Aqsa Martyr’s Brigade in Jenin, Zacharia Zubedi explained that his group still refused women on the grounds that there were plenty of men to do the job. Zubedi however admitted that many more women than men who volunteered themselves to him as suicide bombers. When asked the reason he said it was likely that Palestinian women faced fewer options in terms of fighting back – they weren’t able to volunteer as active combatants so they volunteered as suicide bombers instead. Nevertheless at the time his group’s policy was still to refuse them. Indeed most Palestinian senders of female bombers stated in prison interviews to researcher Yoram Schweitzer that they regretted sending women and only did so when the women were absolutely desperate to go and the tactical advantages of using women so outweighed their sender’s moral reservations that they gave in to using women as bombers. Darine Abu Aisha was one of these cases—her sender was desperate to revenge for a Hamas killing and Darine was desperate to take a mission.8

Al Qaeda in Iraq was similar to the Palestinians, only equipping women for suicide missions when they became desperate in the face of enhanced security. Knowing that women in burqas could still breach checkpoints to carry out attacks, the group began to send them in droves.9 Chechens on the other hand, used female suicide bombers from the start with a fifty/fifty ration of males to females throughout their campaign of suicide missions. In their context females were more liberated than their Middle Eastern counterparts before the conflicts began—working outside of their homes and dressing in modern clothing, and they simply continued to work alongside their men in the pursuit of terrorism as well. They did not however rise to leadership positions in their group.10

There is evidence now that as ISIS gets more hemmed in and needs to replace the male cadres who have already carried out suicide missions, women may also be sent as suicide bombers. The ISIS wedding certificate as of May of 2015 states that the decision over an ISIS bride’s life given in “martyrdom” rests with the Islamic State’s leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Under ’conditions of wife’ it states: 'If the Prince of believers [Baghdadi] consents to her carrying out a suicide mission, then her husband should not prohibit her.'

Anytime a terrorist group allows women to join there are multiple considerations—about female modesty and sexuality, the ability to carry heavy packs, travel and overnight with the group, ability to operate heavy artillery, etc. The PKK for instance, sacrificed some of their female cadres as suicide operatives when they found the women could not carry their equipment when having to hike and did not travel well. The male leaders judged it better to use them in a suicide mission—sometimes even ordering them at gunpoint into such missions. The Palestinians found that the modesty requirements for grooming a female suicide terrorist—including dressing her for her mission took a toll on their resources and with more people involved the more likelihood of being discovered. Terrorists have also stated that sometimes using women is a disadvantage because they like to talk more than the men and may compromise operational security. This was noted in the Toronto 18—according to security professionals that rounded them up, that the spouses and girlfriends were talkative and compromised their secrecy.

**Roles for Female Terrorists**

Given that terrorist groups are male dominated, which roles females are allowed to play are decided upon by the men. In many groups, including al Qaeda and ISIS, women were initially blocked from active combat roles, although in others—such as the FARC, the PKK and the Tamil Tigers females were welcomed, and even at times forced, to join as guerilla fighters. The roles for women in terrorist groups vary widely and include: hijacker, trainer, security staffer, sharia enforcer, spy, assassin, bomb maker, seducer and saboteur, wife, courier of messages or funds, fund raiser, recruiter, propaganda maker, translator, suicide operative and so on.

Belgian, Malika al Aroud who was married to Abdessatar Dahman, one of the men who killed General Massoud in Afghanistan (while posing as a journalist), for instance ran a website in which she tried to shame men into joining the militant jihad and carrying out criminal acts. British Samina Malik, known as the “lyrical terrorist” wrote poems and songs inciting violence against “infidels”. On the subject of beheadings she wrote, "It's not messy or as hard as some may think, It's all about the flow of the wrist… You'll feel the knife hit the wind and food pipe, But Don't Stop, Continue with all your might." Malik worked in a Heathrow store at the time she was caught. Colleen LaRose, an American convert was radicalized online and seduced by her recruiter into plotting to kill Swedish artist, Lars Vilks who had depicted the head of the

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14 March 2015 Personal communication with a CSIS operative.
Prophet on a dog. Palestinian Amna Muna lured a sixteen Israeli teen, Ofir Rahum, to Ramallah under the pretext of a sexual rendezvous where he was ambushed and shot dead by Fatah militants. IRA member, Donna Maquire was convicted of attempted murder and spying with intent to sabotage after the 1989 bombing of British military barracks in Germany. Umm Layth thought to be Scottish Aqsa Mahmoud uses social media to lure other young women to join ISIS as jihadi brides.

Female Vulnerabilities in Recruitment

Some of the women joining terrorist groups had traumatic or troubled pasts that made them particularly susceptible to being recruited. LaRose, who was known as “Jihad Jane” for instance had been raped repeated by her father at a very young age and became a runaway at age thirteen leading to prostitution and heavy drug use. She turned to Islam and was lured into trying to become an assassin by her Internet “lover”. Belgian Malika Aroud had been a heavy partier and cleaned up her life after finding Islam, as did Muriel Degauque. Both women married into the movement. Women that are raped may join a terror movement out of anger, a desire for revenge and sometimes because they feel their life chances have been ruined by rape. It should be noted that the rapes are generally from the opposing forces versus from their own cadres, but there have been cases of sexually compromised women being coerced by their own side into suicide operations.

Others are simply vulnerable to recruitment because they are seeking personal fulfillment, adventure, personal significance, life purpose or are troubled and even traumatized by the plight of other Muslims or angered by foreign policy responses that play into the ISIS and al Qaeda narrative of Islam, Islamic lands and Muslims supposedly being attacked by the West. In conflict zones such as Chechnya or Palestine women are often prompted into action by a desire for revenge. In conflict zones they may have become so traumatized by violence they have witnessed first hand or heard about in their communities that they are willing to give their lives to fight back. Palestinian Arin Ahmed for instance told me that after her militant boyfriend was killed by an Israeli missile (the Israelis dispute this) she almost immediately abandoned her university and plans to become a banker and volunteered for a suicide mission.15

Gender Differences in Moral Reasoning

Initial research into the development of moral reasoning by Lawrence Kohlberg, found that males, according to the gender specific way he measured, were more likely to become stuck at a lower level of moral reasoning than their male counterparts.16 However when researcher Carol Gilligan designed things differently she and her colleagues found that girls are not less moral, they simply construct their moral reasoning in a different manner. They are much more likely to base their moral reasoning based on caring relationships.17 This difference along gender lines in moral reasoning however can create frictions in terrorist groups. For instance the two female suicide operatives who joined their male cadres in taking part in the Beslan school mass-hostage taking were shocked to learn that their target had changed from overtaking FSB headquarters to taking mothers and children in a North Ossetia school. The female

terrorists protested to their male cadres and were told as a result that they could suicide early on in the siege and carry on to Paradise but that the decision was final. The men decided the children were going to be held for impossible ransom terms (demands for the Russian Federal Forces to immediately quit Chechnya and independence to be granted) and some of their parents brutally massacred. According to surviving hostages, the women terrorists refused to carry on with the hostage-taking and either self-detonated after the first day or were shot by their male cadres.  

**Gender Differences in Recruitment**

In conservative communities women are often dictated to by their family members—who they can see, talk to and even marry. These women are often confined to home or only allowed out in public with family members, which can make it hard to be recruited into a terrorist group by strangers. With the advent of Internet based recruitment and the social media savvy of groups like ISIS and al Qaeda, women are increasingly being reached via the Internet. In chat rooms they suddenly find themselves on equal footing with the men—with their opinions and statements receiving equal respect. And they may be able to deepen relationships that would have been difficult to develop in person.

For instance in the Netherlands a male member of the Hofstad group recruited a number of Muslim women in Internet chat rooms by flirting with and ultimately inviting them to take part in a study group run by a female. Over time these women were led into extremism and agreed to write last wills and testaments in anticipation of becoming suicide operatives and to make informal marriages that were consummated in many of the cases with the male operatives—one who hoped to make a Beslan type attack in the Netherlands.

Al Qaeda, and ISIS even more so, have lured women via social media and Internet. They have created slick on-line magazines glorifying female roles in jihad including supporting mujahideen by marrying and creating families with them. And ISIS by declaring its caliphate in the Middle East has capitalized on treasured Muslim ideals of restoring former Islamic glory. Many young women have fallen prey to the utopian dream offered by ISIS via social media. American Shannon Conley for instance fell in love with an ISIS fighter on chat and via Skype and tried to join him in Syria while bringing material support for ISIS. Impressionable girls from Canada, UK, France, Belgium and many other countries have also been contacted via social media to lure them into the arms of ISIS fighters who try to convince them that they will be taking part in building a utopian state governed by Islamic ideals. In France, for instance, a journalist posing on social media as an ISIS supporter soon found herself personally contacted

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by a male ISIS fighter who tried to seduce her into marrying him and coming to Syria.\textsuperscript{20} ISIS even uses women to lure other women into the group.\textsuperscript{21}

Conclusion

Inside and outside of conflict zones we must also keep in mind that politics matter. Occupations, drone kills, heavy handed military interventions, destruction of homes, loss of territory and resources, changes in power balances, killing of civilians, rapes of females by opposing forces can engender strong motivations to join a terrorist group—even from those far removed from such experiences. Today the Internet can make what happens in one part of the world rapidly and graphically available for consumption in another. Then all it takes is a terrorist group to frame the problem and the solution in violent terrorist terms while weaving its ideological justifications around graphic and emotionally upsetting imagery, often weaving in religion and music to boot.

The same things that anger females also anger males, but the female calculus for deciding to activate into a terrorist group often differs and females often take up different roles than men once they get on the terrorist trajectory. There should be no doubt that women can be every bit as lethal as men, and perhaps more so, because we rarely suspect them of being terrorists and are often blinded to their mission until it’s too late.
