

Participants, Enablers, and Preventers: The Roles of Women in Terrorism

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The idea of relating a particular crime or wrong to a given demographic is a troubling one. While many have noted that warfare, terrorism, and violence are, for the most part, dominated by men, the role of women therein, while comparatively minimal, is crucial. Indeed, any demographic comprising more than half of the world's population in theory ought to be well-placed to curb, accelerate, or in some other way impact a particular trend. The role of women in terrorism is explored here through three distinct types of involvement: direct involvement in terrorist acts; enabling of others to commit such acts; and facilitating the disengagement of others from violent or extremist groups. Indeed, this paper examines the wide spectrum of roles women play in terrorism – from women as intelligence gatherers, to the more recent phenomena of female suicide bombers and translators for more 'active' terrorists – and explores the idea that women are well-placed to both take part in terrorist violence (through direct participation in attacks or in facilitating terrorists), and reduce its impact (by preventing others from participating or by helping those who do join to disengage from violence). The paper will also look each type of involvement in terrorism through the lens of gender equality.

The involvement of women in terrorist organisations is by no means new, but their role therein has changed markedly over recent years. Up until the late twentieth century, women in terrorist organisations were largely assigned tasks removed from the front lines of political violence – they existed only to support their male counterparts, through gathering intelligence, providing healthcare, and even maintaining safe houses for more-active terrorists. Since then, and though women continue to perform those functions, the role of female terrorists has evolved into something more active, perhaps 'tougher, more fanatical, more loyal', than previously seen.¹ Indeed, while formerly confined to more auxiliary roles, female members of violent extremist groups now engage directly in attacks, including suicide bombings, attracting widespread disbelief and heightened media interest.

After looking at terrorism's definitional problems, this paper will examine three different categories of involvement by women in terrorism: women as terrorists – actually joining extremist organisations and carrying out attacks; women as enablers – their role in motivating, inspiring, or encouraging potential terrorists; and women as 'preventers' – analysis of their involvement in counterterrorism. In so doing, it will focus on women and terrorism, as opposed to the overlapping concept of women and war. Both concepts – of

women engaging in terrorism and of women's roles in wars – are broad and nuanced, and a single paper cannot do both justice. For this reason, the former alone will be examined here.

Both terrorism and gender in conflict have been studied and written about extensively. The recognition of rape as a weapon of war has led to a timely re-evaluation of gender in warfare,² and much has been written on the subject of terrorism, particularly since September 2001, when terrorism entered into mainstream media and non-academic literature, even in those countries not directly affected by it. Yet, terrorism through the prism of gender has only recently gained ground in academic and media discourse, partly due to the rise of the female suicide bomber.³ This study will consult literature mainly on political violence, but also on the role of women in society, drawing out observations on the impact of women on terrorism, as well as on how women's unique position in society can be harnessed for counterterrorism purposes. In addition, the paper will briefly comment on what the implications are for gender equality. Indeed, does the advent of female terrorists mirror the advance of women in society? This paper will provide a broad overview of the women's roles in terrorism, with more-detailed comments on their potential for de-radicalising active and potential terrorists.

Women as Participants in Terrorism

Although 'terrorism' is one of the most widely used words in both international relations and the news media, the word lacks a clear, universal definition. Those who try to characterise it often harbour underlying biases (rendering their definitions questionable), or, in the case of some governments and the media, they may seek to label as many events as possible with a provocative term to demonise a particular group or to create headlines. 'Terrorism' has a pejorative implication and those associated with it are therefore degraded politically and socially.⁴ Most would agree, however, that fear is intrinsic to any 'successful' terrorism. As political scientist Martha Crenshaw explains, '[t]errorism is a method by which an agent tends to produce terror in order to impose his[her] domination'.⁵ Many other definitions of terrorism exist, including Walter Laqueur's assertion that the meaning of terrorism has been changing throughout history,⁶ and Brian Michael Jenkins' description of the phenomenon as the use – or threatened use – of force to bring about political change.⁷ For the purposes of this work, Jenkins' definition shall suffice, but with the qualifier that, in the case of millennialist or some fundamentalist groups, political change need not be the final end.⁸

Examples of women committing terrorist acts abound. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been cited as amongst the first terrorist groups to employ women as

attackers, with over one-third of their membership composed of females, ‘who, in addition to suicide bomb missions, have duties on the battlefield, in the kitchen, and in medical camps’.⁹ LTTE’s ‘Black Tigresses’, are not alone. The Chechen ‘Black Widows’, a brigade of female suicide bombers, carried out a dozen suicide bombings over two years, murdering 330 people.¹⁰ Similarly, Wafa Idris, the first female suicide bomber, was a twenty-eight-year-old working for the Palestinian Red Crescent when she was deployed on a suicide mission to Jerusalem in 2002. Her bomb killed one person (in addition to herself), and injured 114.¹¹ While the death toll was low, Idris’ bombing, carried out for the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, served as an excellent recruitment tool, particularly among women. Indeed, the group subsequently established ‘squads of willing female suicide bombers’ – squads actually named for Idris.¹² Similarly, during the intifadas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas both ‘witnessed a surge in female bombers... Syrian nationalists and Kurdish separatists operate in this way, and women in Uzbekistan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Egypt have also joined the terror ranks’.¹³

Woman: the perfect terrorist?

Women make excellent terrorists. Traditionally society’s inherently nurturing and non-violent caregivers, females tend to attract less attention from security services and are less prone to be searched, questioned, and interrogated in the way that males are – particularly in Muslim societies, which carry particular cultural sensitivities regarding the role of women.¹⁴ Testament to this, earlier this month a suicide bomber in Somalia ‘disguised himself as a woman, complete with a veil and a female’s shoes’, before detonating explosives in a crowded Mogadishu hotel.¹⁵ And even when women are under suspicion, the capacity may not exist to interrogate them: after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, airport security services struggled to recruit enough female staff to carry out searches of women. One of the overriding attractions of using females for violent ends is, therefore, the slim chance of their attracting suspicion; additionally, even if that suspicion is there, the capacity may not exist to stop them. In part because violence against women (and children) is deemed by society to be more abhorrent (due to their supposed greater vulnerability), terrorism carried out by women is also more shocking, as will be discussed later in the paper. Ironically, it is the very ‘weakness’ that makes women the most appealing/effective victims (in that they elicit wider coverage for the group behind the attack) that appears to make women terrorism’s best instigators.

Following the 2002 Moscow theatre hostage crisis, which involved female as well as male hostage-takers, one commentator posited that, for a woman to commit terrorism, she must be more fanatical than a male terrorist, and is therefore more ‘terrifying’ than her male colleagues: ‘For feminine engagement in activities that are so classically male bespeaks a far greater zeal’. This is hard to verify, but that his analysis of women and terrorism goes on to note that female Islamists must be especially zealous, given that the ‘reward’ of virgins awaiting the suicide bomber in heaven holds no appeal for them certainly seems plausible.¹⁶ It could then be said that the greater fear elicited by the female extremist adds to her effectiveness as a terrorist.

Terrorist groups manipulate and capitalise on the stereotypes of women to suit their violent goals. Suicide bombings in themselves, while still abhorrent, are increasingly commonplace – almost weekly, news consumers see coverage of bombings in graphic detail. Terrorists have thus sought out ways to renew the impact of their violence (to which many, particularly in areas not directly impacted by attacks, have become partially desensitised), and the use of women as bombers is symptomatic of this. With most terrorism hinging on the publicity it attracts, groups play into the shock value of using women as human bombs; this elicits the ‘double-shock’ of both the brutality of the act itself and the notion of someone’s daughter/mother/sister/wife as the instigator. Summing up the importance of the ‘oxygen’ publicity affords terrorist organisations,¹⁷ *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) leader Ramdane Abane asks rhetorically, ‘Is it preferable for our cause to kill ten enemies in an *oued* [dry riverbed] of Telergma when no one will talk of it, or a single man in Algiers which will be noted the next day by the American press?’¹⁸

Not only do female terrorists elicit more coverage, boosting both the fear a given attack elicits and the number of potential recruits reached, the *type* of coverage received is also different from that given to their male colleagues. Coverage of acts committed by women ‘provide[s] more detail about possible motivations of the *individual*, while actions committed by men [are] explained more often in terms of the *group’s* motivation’.¹⁹ (My emphasis.) Indeed, female terrorists also increase the likelihood that the social conditions, discrimination, and hardships experienced by a given group will be featured in the news media,²⁰ representing a significant incentive for particular organisations to use women over men.

While suicide terrorism exemplifies vividly the impact female terrorists can have, other roles for women in political violence should not be overlooked. In terms of their roles away from the front lines of terrorism, women in extremist organisations were in the past

often confined to less-active duties, such as healthcare provision, intelligence gathering, and even maintenance of safe houses for more-active terrorists. Some still do play these roles, and recent studies of terrorism and the internet have unearthed evidence of women now also playing the role of ‘scholar’, translating for their male counterparts and interpreting religious texts. In addition, females can boost depleted numbers of combatants, be it by joining the ranks themselves or by providing ‘jihad wombs’.²¹ They also contribute by using their maiden names to open bank accounts (to avoid attracting the attention of antiterrorism agencies), and even ‘raising money for terror groups through charity functions’.²²

Does all this make a woman the perfect terrorist? While women hold many comparative advantages over men – eliciting less suspicion, holding greater shock value, and even remaining engaged in terrorism longer than do men on average²³ – some factors make women less attractive. In the face of stereotypes of women as non-violent wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters, it surprises many to learn that female terrorists are viewed by some as more deadly, in that some security forces deem them less likely to hesitate when carrying out a violent mission. One scholar further posits that women terrorists are ‘possessors of a greater capacity for suffering.’²⁴ Reasons for this resoluteness can only be speculated about, but the small variations between genders in why individuals engage in terrorism could be relevant: as will be discussed, vengeance is a particularly strong motivator among female extremists and may serve also to sustain a woman’s interest, and involvement, in a given cause. Counterterrorism recruits in INTERPOL accordingly even follow a shoot-the-women-first policy.²⁵

Other factors can discourage the use of women by terrorists groups: some members may view women as a threat to group cohesion (many groups lean heavily on male bonding to sustain the dynamic needed to commit violence for a given cause), and certain societies frown upon the use of women in combat roles. However, the overwhelming importance of publicity to terrorism seems to outweigh such concerns regarding female terrorists: women extremists occupy more column inches than do their male counterparts. And, with all terrorism, coverage confers the impression of power – something all terrorist groups seek to wield.

What motivates women terrorists

A recent study of what motivates suicide terrorists found that there was little variation between genders in this regard – both men and women tend to engage in terrorism for similar reasons. However, a few important differences in motivation were noted, including, among

women, vengeance. Having lost a loved one at the hands of a particular group's perceived enemy, a mother, wife, or sister may be more inclined to join that group, and actively engage in terrorism.²⁶ Wafa Idris felt personally aggrieved by the horrors she witnessed at the Palestinian Red Crescent, by her brother's imprisonment, and at being displaced from Ramallah by Israel. But analysts also cite personal sadnesses she endured, unrelated to her cause, as motivation for her actions: 'After marriage, Idris had a late miscarriage. The doctors said she could have no more children. Her husband's response was to divorce her and marry again'.²⁷ Seldom does one see this type of analysis where male bombers are concerned; that attacks instigated by females are analysed in greater depth, speaks to the fascination they seem to hold over the media and potential extremists alike.

Terrorist recruiters targeting women play into their need to feel involved, which is similar to male-terrorist recruitment, but the reasons for that lack of involvement in society differ. For example, in Central Asia, the Kyrgyz, largely non-violent, terrorist group Hizb-ut-Tabhir (HT), is pursuing the restoration of an Islamic caliphate in the region through allegedly peaceful political means. A recent International Crisis Group report on HT examines why, in a country where women enjoy a secular society and relative equality, they are moved to support HT – a movement which appears to marginalise them. The report finds that since Kyrgyzstan, post-independence, lacks a coherent national identity, an Islamic one fills that void. Islam's traditional representatives often do not make any appeal to women, whereas HT does, offering both social services and religious education to women. The HT brand of Islam emphasises 'Islamic sisterhood', and, in conservative areas, where women and girls have few social outlets, gender-segregated HT meetings allow women to mix with other women and reap the benefits of such interactions.²⁸

The type of marginalisation that, in various Western societies, fuelled women's liberation movements, is replaced in other, less-free societies (where rights are fiercely withheld), by the appeal of extremism. Rather than agitation for gender equality, which is notoriously elusive in some societies, a minority of women turn to other causes, which give them a sense of belonging and the opportunity to be involved in the types of groups previously unavailable to them.

From these examples – particularly that of HT in Kyrgyzstan – it is clear that marginalisation by society at large makes individuals more vulnerable to the appeal of extremism. In the case of women specifically, it could be extrapolated that the very marginalisation they experience as a result of gender inequality, is played on by terrorists to bring them into sphere of extremism, increasingly as active participants. As will be discussed,

terrorism can seem like a more alluring pursuit to women in those societies where their rights, gender and otherwise, are curtailed – perhaps even suicide can seem appealing. But we must note that gender serves as little incentive in itself to commit violence, and neither sex seems moved to carry out terrorist attacks based on gender alone. What should be taken away from these observations is that outlets need be given to empower women in those societies where extremism is most likely to fill the empowerment vacuum. In essence, marginalisation based on gender is something of a ‘force multiplier’ where fertile ground for extremism already exists.

Women as Enablers of Terrorism

In number, women are not equal to men, constituting more than half of the world population, and in their traditional roles – as mothers, wives, sisters, and girlfriends – females may impact every facet of terrorist activity. It is in this that they have been cited as motivation for other terrorists to engage in violence, as well as as reason to disengage, which will be elaborated later on. Women terrorists also appear to reach a wider audience where terrorist recruitment is concerned; the cults of personality female terrorists attract can serve to inspire would-be extremists and build support for a given cause. In their non-violent roles, also, women in specific communities actively recruit terrorists:

In Syria, similar to the tactics of HT in Kyrgyzstan, sisterhood organisations proselytise extreme religious doctrine; while, in Pakistan, the ‘mujahidaat’ are women who engage in ‘collective non-violent endeavors’ geared towards recruiting and supporting violent extremist groups. In 2008, 1,000 women in Lebanon marched to show their support for Hezbollah; and, in Gaza, women gathered to form a human barrier between Israeli forces and militants hiding in a mosque in 2006.²⁹ These examples of women ‘enabling’ terrorism and facilitating warfare can be ascribed to the types of discontent that motivate all terrorists, but, for women in societies where their rights are oppressed on the grounds of gender, something further can be inferred: gender equality in other aspects of life would remove a layer of discontent that contributes to terrorism.

The cult of personality that the female terrorist seems to attract is also important in the recruitment and inspiration of other terrorists. Indeed, women seem more likely to receive such attention than men, thus further prolonging media interest – something on which terrorist groups thrive. Leila Khaled, a Palestinian hijacker with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), drew much public attention for the very fact of her gender.³⁰ Aged just twenty-one years, Khaled’s involvement in the 1969 hijacking of a passenger flight

received wide coverage, in a way very appealing to terrorist recruiters: ‘Her sexuality was always emphasised... She is the pin-up of armed struggle; like her hero, Che Guevara, Khaled had the glamour as well as the belief’.³¹ Her role morphed into one of a cultural icon, foreshadowing that of Wafa Idris, who also seemed to fascinate commentators: ‘The Arab press glorified Idris. One Egyptian newspaper compared her to the Mona Lisa, registering her “dreamy eyes and the mysterious smile on her lips.” Others cited Joan of Arc, or the Virgin Mary.’³² Khaled and Idris attracted an entirely different type of media coverage than do their male counterparts. Very rarely – if ever – do male suicide bombers make headlines based on their physical attractiveness. But the media coverage paid dividends for their respective organisations. Following her death, Idris attracted copycats: more women suicide bombers materialised in the West Bank:

One [female suicide bomber], a 21-year-old English-literature student named Darin Aisheh, detonated explosives in her car at a military checkpoint in February, wounding three policemen. Andaleeb Takafka, 20, killed herself and six others, and injured 104 people in April, using explosive tied to her waist. Ayat Akhras, 18, blew herself up outside a Jerusalem bus stop a month earlier.³³

In terms of ‘traditional’ (or non-suicide) terrorism, female role models have also had a place in history. Ulrike Meinhof of the Red Army Faction, active in Germany in the 1970s, famously directed her group’s campaign, which, unlike most other terrorist organisations, actually cited women’s liberation as a strand of its goals. For many years the most famous female terrorist, Meinhof has been credited with inspiring German terrorism,³⁴ and has been the subject of numerous books and a handful of films. Indeed, in 1981 ten of the fourteen most-wanted terrorists in West Germany were female.³⁵ Bernadette Devlin, a vocal supporter of the Irish Republicanism, became the youngest female Member of the British Parliament (in a high-profile effort to champion Irish independence) and drew much attention, both for the fact of her age and her gender. Like Meinhof, she inspired much interest, even gaining the nickname ‘Fidel Castro in a miniskirt’. A biopic about her is in production.³⁶

As well as female suicide bombers spurring imitators, and other female terrorists becoming figureheads for their causes, the actions of women not actually active in terrorism, but rather in ‘encouraging’ terrorists, can have devastating consequences. Among extremists, suicide bombers are lauded as heroes, in a way deeply disturbing to the moderate majority. As such, some families, mothers in particular, aspire to have their sons sacrificed as martyrs: ‘Families of “martyrs” are honoured as family members of someone who gave his life “to the cause”’. Many speak of their sons’, husbands’, or brothers’ commitment, dedication, and the

pride felt by society'.³⁷ Indeed, the glamorisation of martyrdom appears to be perpetuated by the families, spouses, and partners, which speaks to both women's role in radicalising moderates and their potential for de-radicalising the extreme. Just as military traditions can span generations within families, with son after father, after grandfather, enlisting in the armed forces, traditions of extremism can also perpetuate.

While men are naturally equally, and perhaps more, guilty of this sort of 'encouragement' (in terms of offspring turning to terrorism) that women are being singled out in counterterrorism for their potential to de-radicalise their husbands, brothers, and sons speaks to the importance of their role in radicalisation. As does the example of Bernadette Devlin, whose experience can perhaps be cited as evidence of the role of families (mothers specifically) in actually enabling their children in the pursuit of extremism: her daughter, Róisín McAliskey, was arrested in Germany in connection with an IRA bombing of a British Army barracks there.³⁸ This speaks to the role of mothers in influencing offspring towards terrorism, and exemplifies what it is that newer counterterrorism programmes seek to prevent. (The roles of women in de-radicalisation and 'prevention' will be examined in the next section of the paper.)

Returning to the example of suicide 'martyrs', male bombers and their families often cite the promise of seventy-two virgin brides awaiting them in heaven upon completing their missions as part of their motivation.³⁹ An attack carried out by al-Qassam in 1994 demonstrates the encouragement families provide to some terrorists: 'The bomber's family and the sponsoring organization celebrate his martyrdom with festivities, as if it were a wedding.... Often, the mother will ululate in joy over the honor that Allah has bestowed upon her family'.⁴⁰

Indeed, in different ways, potential terrorists are encouraged by extremist groups and by those in their social network to engage in terrorism, but the differences between the two genders in these respects merit examination. With women holding so much potential in terms of counterterrorism, the exact nature of their role in 'enabling' terrorism should also be better understood.

Women as 'Preventers' of Terrorism

While women are cited as motivation to enter into violent extremism, much evidence exists of their roles in facilitating disengagement from terrorism and in otherwise thwarting terrorist activity.⁴¹ In removing their children from cultures of extremism – or preventing their falling prey to extremism in the first place, by becoming intelligence officers, and even as spouses

involved in the rehabilitation of extremists, women make very effective ‘counterterrorists’. Counterterrorism programmes worldwide are beginning to focus more on ‘softer’ measures than the military- and police-centred approaches increasingly seen in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, favouring instead de-radicalisation through education and dialogue, as well as increases in aid and poverty-alleviation policies. In these newer ‘de-radicalisation’ programmes, terrorists and other violent extremists are rehabilitated in various ways, often including education in the true peaceful meanings of religious texts, and are usually given a more solid grounding in social networks removed from their previous extremist affiliations. In this section, examples of extant terrorism-prevention and terrorist-rehabilitation programmes with women at their centres are examined.

Given that the group dynamic afforded by terrorist organisations for individual members often replaces that person’s family, strengthened family and relationship ties can help facilitate a person’s disengagement from a particular cause, i.e., to provide them with a non-violent, appealing alternative to terrorism. Indeed, Bjørgo and others highlight the importance of avoiding a ‘social vacuum’, when a terrorist repents, and women can play a fundamental role in this.⁴² In his study of what moves right-wing extremists to de-radicalise, he asserts that gaining and upholding family commitments, including ‘getting a girlfriend (or boyfriend)’, are among the strongest motives for leaving a cause behind.⁴³ As such, programmes exist to facilitate not just finding employment, but entering into marriage, all as part of the rehabilitation of violent extremists.⁴⁴

A Moroccan initiative that focuses on women, recruiting them as messengers to present the moderate mainstream Islam as a counterweight to fundamentalist ideology, has met with some success. Spearheaded by the Moroccan King, the initiative seeks to ‘feminize the face of Islam’, in order to provide an enlightened alternative to the extremist, often misrepresented brand of Islam terrorist groups employ.⁴⁵

In Saudi Arabia, a counterterrorism scheme called the ‘Saudi Counselling Programme’, has been the most successful and expansive of its kind, and Christopher Boucek posits that this is due in part to its being rooted in respect for cultural and religious traditions.⁴⁶ It could be extrapolated from this that women, as central figures in every culture, could hold the key to developing societal answers to a given society’s terrorism problem, or at least to grounding each initiative in the appropriate culture. A spate of new programmes centred on mothers’ preventing the radicalisation of their children supports this, and suggests that women have a role to play in actually preventing a new generation of extremists. In Saudi Arabia specifically, the ‘Best Mother Award’ programme supports women whose

husbands are serving time in prison for involvement in terrorism. In this way, the programme helps provide a stable environment for raising the children of terrorists, thus helping prevent both recidivism on the part of the terrorist, and the child's falling prey to extremism also.⁴⁷ This is a fitting counterweight to the reality that terrorist groups financially compensate families of their bombers.

Programmes focussing on family ties, and on mothers specifically, are gaining popularity. In essence, and as these programmes attest, if extremism can start with a family's involvement, it can end that way, too.

An important thread of many new counterterrorism programmes is grassroots involvement by those directly touched by extremism. The role of women in radicalising and motivating some terrorists is not only counterbalanced, but perhaps outweighed, by the role of women elsewhere in preventing radicalisation and violence. Following a Palestinian suicide bombing, Rory McCarthy interviewed a Palestinian woman who came out unequivocally against, not just violence, but the use of women in terrorist attacks:

[S]he is opposed to women taking up suicide bombing. 'I don't support this at all. It is also a jihad to care about your children and to bring them up well,' she says. And, after all, she adds, the bombing had hardly achieved a major military objective. 'What did it do? It was just a suicide. If I'm facing a tank, there isn't anything I can do', she says. 'Women can do something else, like teach their sons and daughters to become doctors and engineers. We don't all need to be martyrs.'⁴⁸

It is exactly this sort of sentiment, widespread amongst societies infected by violence or political unrest, that many non-governmental organizations and governments seize upon in developing softer antiterrorism programmes.

Just as the role of women in terrorism has evolved over the years, with females becoming more active participants, moving into the frontlines, the role of women in counterterrorism has also evolved. Women are increasingly sought after by governmental intelligence agencies to work on countering terrorism, in addition to specific programmes which hinge on women's involvement. Such programmes include, at the governmental level, a small US initiative called 'Daughters of Iraq', which aims to identify and catch female terrorists through the training of Iraqi women⁴⁹; and, at a grassroots level, British Muslim women are actively trying to challenge stereotypes of their community as 'terrorists.'⁵⁰

Conclusion

Terrorism, while universally feared, relates differently to each gender; a recent Turkish study shows that women fear terrorism more than men do.⁵¹ And this paper has shown that, in the

three types of involvement examined, women behave differently, are treated differently, and often meet different reactions than do their male-terrorist and male-counterterrorist counterparts.

While the involvement of women in terrorist activities is not new, recognition and understanding of it, particularly in the media, have only recently grown, and the specific duties females perform have gradually been altering over time. Indeed, recognition of women's potential has also grown amongst terrorist organizations. For reasons ranging from stereotypes, appearance, and married-names, to behaviour, instinct, and personality types, women in many ways are better terrorists than men. As the so-called 'fairer sex', females are selected by terrorist groups to commit bombings – be it for the FLN in Algiers, or Hamas in Gaza – because society traditionally associates them with weakness and non-violence and they therefore go undetected by security services (who are unwilling or unable to interrogate them.) These stereotypes also confer greater shock value on attacks, something terrorist groups strive for to amplify coverage, and, consequently, to terrorise and instil widespread fear. Even when terrorists deem a particular attack unsuccessful in furthering their political or other goals, extensive coverage by the news media can constitute resounding success in terms of publicising a group's existence, aims, and recruitment, as the al-Aqsa Martyrs learned from the suicide of Wafa Idris. This paper has demonstrated the potential of women to amplify and direct coverage.

Women also play a role in the inspiration, recruitment, and motivation of individual terrorists. As instigators of attacks, females tend to attract both more media attention and a greater following among extremists, sometimes, as with Wafa Idris, spurring imitators. While 'traditional' terrorism (that of the IRA, ETA, RAF, inter alia) has likely peaked, and the days of the more high-profile figureheads for such groups, like Meinhof and Khaled, are in the past, the type of fascination such women attract, and their ability to inspire followers, have endured through the present day, as we have seen with Idris. Women are also cited as incentives for 'martyrs' to carry out suicide missions – the seventy-two virgins awaiting them in heaven – and are encouraged in so doing by families, with mothers often singled out specifically.

In terms of counterterrorism, the growing involvement of women offers some hope. As governments and non-governmental organisations begin to recognise the benefits of soft measures to de-radicalise and disengage individuals from terrorism, the role of women increases. With successful programmes already underway worldwide – including in Saudi Arabia, Germany, Morocco, and elsewhere – their success may be emulated in other states.

Furthermore, the same traits that make women good terrorists can also serve them well in counterterrorism: ‘After all, the element of surprise works both ways. We should incorporate more women in our intelligence fields who might more stealthily get behind enemy lines to gather information’.⁵²

While female terrorists have historically been more memorable and have spurred more imitators, it is important to note that they are still vastly outnumbered by their male counterparts.⁵³ It should also be noted that gender itself is seldom cited as motive to commit terrorism and that, while the arguments presented here highlight the different types of involvement women have in violent extremism as compared to men, neither gender necessarily has greater reason to commit terrorism than the other. A minority of terrorist organizations – notably Sendero Luminoso in Peru and the Red Army Faction – have incorporated women’s liberation into their aims, and so most organizations that use women are doing just that: using/exploiting women as actors in a cause that will do little for either them personally or for gender empowerment more broadly. Terrorism is an ‘equal-opportunity employer’,⁵⁴ yet, while female terrorists are seen to show courage and determination in their activities, as parts of a system that affords them less-than-equal status, they can hardly be deemed modern-day suffragettes.

To some extent, the changing roles of women in terrorism – from passive supporters of their male colleagues, to active participants in recruitment and attacks – have mirrored the advance of women in society more broadly. But the reasoning behind these ‘advances’ in female terrorism, far from constituting recognition of equality, paints a more nuanced and deceptive picture, and, indeed, these changes do not represent progress at all. Women appear to be becoming ‘successful’ terrorists due to the very things deemed to ‘weaken’ their case for equality with men in society more generally.

The link between gender equality and the roles of women in terrorism also hinges on the notion that the marginalisation they experience in certain societies can make the acceptance and prestige bestowed on them by a terrorist group enormously appealing – particularly so with suicide bombing. Where their rights are restricted, women are more likely to turn to terrorism, even if, and sometimes because, that means death. Any strides towards gender equality and women’s liberation made in those societies without equitable women’s rights are therefore good sense when it comes to preventing terrorism, especially in light of the softer counterterrorism measures – such as the programmes cited in this paper – which are seen more and more as the way forward.

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Notes

¹ Cindy C. Combs, *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century, 2nd Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000), p.61. Women are also disproportionately impacted by conflict more generally. According international aid agencies, almost 60 percent of the approximately 2.5 million people displaced by the 'war on terror' are female. See Rafia Zakaria, 'Terror, Tribes, and the War on Women in Pakistan', *Asian Conflicts Reports*, no.8 (October 2009), p.4.

² Maria Stern and Marysia Zalewski, 'Feminist Fatigue(s): Reflections on Feminism and Familiar Fables of Militarisation', *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 3 (July 2009): 611-630, p.611.

³ While the number of female suicide bombers has been rising, it should be noted that, in this respect, the genders are not yet equal, with men still outnumbering women. For example, 'Of the 200 or so suicide bombings carried out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in their civil war with the Sri Lankan government at least 60 are thought to have involved female attackers'. See Stephen Khan, Rory McCarthy, and Luke Harding, 'Female Suicide Bombers: Tamil Tiger Teenage Girl Led the Way', *The Guardian*, 11 June 2009, published online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/11/female-suicide-bombers-iraq-sri-lanka>.

⁴ Jonathan R. White, ed., *Terrorism and Homeland Security: Fifth Edition* (Florence, KY: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), p.3.

⁵ Martha Crenshaw, 'The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 16, no.3 (1972): 383-396, p.383.

⁶ Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.8-10.

⁷ Brian Michael Jenkins, 'The Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why of Terrorism', paper presented at the Detroit Police Department Conference on 'Urban Terrorism: Planning or Chaos?' Detroit, November 1984.

⁸ Comments on the variant definitions of terrorism are drawn from Ellie B. Hearne, 'Terrorism, Justification, and Legitimacy: A Case Study of the Provisional Irish Republican Army', unpublished Master's dissertation (St Andrews, UK: University of St Andrews, 2006).

⁹ Paula Broadwell, 'The Growing Role of Women in Terrorism', *Boston Globe*, 12 December 2006.

¹⁰ Broadwell, 'The Growing Role of Women in Terrorism'. It should be noted, though, that 'Russia's elite Alfa anti-terrorist unit, which monitored the Chechens during the Moscow siege, learned that the women were not permitted to explode their bombs without a specific command from their male leader'. See Giles Foden, 'Death and the Maidens', *The Guardian*, 18 July 2003, p.6.

¹¹ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p.164.

¹² Gal Luft, 'The Palestinian H-Bomb: Terror's Winning Strategy', *Foreign Affairs* 81, no.4 (July-August 2002).

¹³ Broadwell, 'The Growing Role of Women in Terrorism'.

¹⁴ 'Because women are stereotyped as nonviolent, they might elicit less attention and thus execute a stealthier attack; there are also inherent sensitivities in searching or questioning a woman, especially in many conservative Muslim societies;' See Broadwell, 'The Growing Role of Women in Terrorism'.

¹⁵ Tristan McConnell, 'Three Somali Ministers Die in Attack on Mogadishu Graduation Ceremony', *The Times* (London), 4 December 2009.

¹⁶ Kevin Myers, 'The Terrible Sight of a Female Terrorist', *Sunday Telegraph* (London), 27 October 2002, p.26.

¹⁷ Former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, famously wanted to deprive the Irish Republican Army of 'the oxygen of publicity on which [terrorists] depend'. As quoted in R. W. Apple, 'Meese Suggests Press Code on Terrorism', *New York Times*, 18 July 1985, p.7-A.

¹⁸ As quoted in Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p.58.

¹⁹ Juliette Shedd, 'Understanding Female Terrorists: An Analysis of Motivation and Media Representation', paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, 31 August 2006.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Broadwell, 'The Growing Role of Women in Terrorism'.

²² Ibid.

²³ Combs, *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, p.61.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ E. MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First* (New York: Random House, 2001), p.xiv.

²⁶ Lindsey O'Rourke, 'Behind the Women Behind the Bomb', *New York Times*, 2008, p.15-A.

²⁷ Foden, 'Death and the Maidens'.

²⁸ Ibid.

- ²⁹ Ibid. 'A 72-year old woman at the standoff, according to the British newspaper *The Guardian*, said she felt empowered – "young, useful, and ready to act."'
- ³⁰ MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First*, p.91.
- ³¹ Katharine Viner, "'I made the ring from a bullet and the pin of a hand grenade,'" *The Guardian*, 26 January 2001, p.2.
- ³² Foden, 'Death and the Maidens.'
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Myers, 'The Terrible Sight of a Female Terrorist'.
- ³⁵ Combs, *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, p.61.
- ³⁶ Cole Moreton, 'Return of the Roaring Girl', *Independent on Sunday* (London), 5 October 2008, p.30.
- ³⁷ Shazadi Beg and Laila Bokhari, 'Pakistan: in Search of a Disengagement Strategy', in Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), pp.224-242, 232.
- ³⁸ BBC News, 'McAliskey Bailed Over Extradition', 21 May 2007, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/6676049.stm. McAliskey's case is a complicated one, and the UK ultimately refused Germany's extradition bid on health grounds. See further Jeremy Hardy, 'A Decade of Injustice', *The Guardian*, 22 August 2007, p.28.
- ³⁹ See, for example, David Hoffman, 'The Making of a "Martyr"; Vision of Paradise Propels Islamic Bombers', *Washington Post*, 12 March 1996, p.1-A.
- ⁴⁰ Nasra Hassan, 'Letter from Gaza: An Arsenal of Believers', *New Yorker*, 17 November 2001.
- ⁴¹ For an overview and further examples of such de-radicalisation programmes, see Naureen Chowdhury Fink with Ellie B. Hearne, 'Beyond Terrorism: De-radicalization and Disengagement from Violent Extremism', (New York: International Peace Institute, October 2008).
- ⁴² Tore Bjørgo, 'Processes of Disengagement from Violent Groups of the Extreme Right', in Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), pp.30-48, pp.41-42.
- ⁴³ 'Getting a girlfriend (or boyfriend) outside the group is a frequent cause of quitting [violent extremist organisations]. Such situations obviously involve establishing new bonds of loyalty and setting different priorities'. Bjørgo, 'Processes of Disengagement', p. 40.
- ⁴⁴ Christopher Boucek, 'Extremist Re-education and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia', in Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), pp.212-223, p.214.
- ⁴⁵ 'By working face-to-face in the community, women (still the primary care givers and nurturers in Moroccan society through their role as mothers, sisters, aunts, friends and community guardians), will present the mainstream face of Islam and curtail fundamentalist violent excesses'. Helen Wilkinson, 'A Moroccan Innovation Worth Considering: Female Guides', *Daily Star* (Beirut), 15 August 2008.
- ⁴⁶ Boucek, 'Extremist Re-education', p.213.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p.214.
- ⁴⁸ Rory McCarthy, 'Sisters, Mothers, Martyrs', *The Guardian*, p.4.
- ⁴⁹ O'Rourke emphasizes the obstacles the programme faces: 'since the root cause of suicide terrorism appears to be anger at occupying forces, we risk blowback if we are seen as trying to buy loyalty from Iraqi women', and the adaptability demonstrated by terrorists thus far suggests Daughters of Iraq and other programmes 'are probably stopgap measures at best'. O'Rourke, 'Behind the Women Behind the Bomb'.
- ⁵⁰ Sadaf Rizvi, 'New Cultures, Security, and Transnational Belonging: Cross-generational Perspectives among British Pakistani Women', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no.3 (2007): 327-342.
- ⁵¹ Pamela Wilcox, M. Murat Ozer, Murat Gunbeyi, and Tarkan Gundogdu, 'Turkish National Police Gender and Fear of Terrorism in Turkey', *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 25, no.3 (August 2009): 341-357.
- ⁵² Broadwell, 'The Growing Role of Women in Terrorism'. See also Foden, 'Death and the Maidens': 'The only answer, for security agencies, is to use more female secret agents... [but] a woman going undercover in a culture where women are not valued is in great danger – even more danger than a man in the same position'.
- ⁵³ McCarthy and Harding, 'Female Suicide Bombers'.
- ⁵⁴ Combs, *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, p.61.