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The Psychology of Female Suicide Terrorism: Context and a Partial, Annotated Bibliography

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Title: The Psychology of Female Suicide Terrorism: Context and a Partial, Annotated Bibliography

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Abstract: The author examines the phenomena of female suicide in the context of terrorism, and the reasons women suicide, examining selected sources on the topic.

In Josef Von Sternberg's and Nicholas Ray's film *Macao* (1952), Jane Russell with killer looks sings "You Kill Me": "...You kill me, you knock me out...You kill me, no, there's no doubt...I'm sure that my love will survive...Because you kill me and keep me so alive...." Freddy Mercury of the band Queen with his own killer looks sings "Killer Queen" (1974), which includes: "She's a Killer Queen...Gunpowder, Gelatine...Dynamite with a laser beam... Guaranteed to blow your mind...Anytime." Miss Russell is singing about a film noir man-Mr. Mercury, about a high class whore, perhaps, of indeterminate or of any gender. They both respectively employ "kill" and "killer" as overcoming someone irresistibly so that life is irrevocably changed—at least for awhile. Isn't this what a real woman is supposed to do to a man? Even with the assertive Miss Russell reversing roles and Mr. Mercury playing with genders, "baby, you kill me" has long been the provenance of the man valuing and objectifying the woman. That's why the Alice Kramden character of *The Honeymooners* is out of line when she says in a 1956 episode, "I'll go fix my lipstick. I won't be gone long, Killer. I call you Killer 'cause you slay me." This leads to her husband Ralph's retort "And I'm calling Bellevue 'cause you're nuts!"

But when baby actually kills herself and others? Time for the behavioral and social scientists, as well as the informed punditry, to get into the act. It is as if the laws of nature—from the hands of God, from the hegemony of sexist patriarchy—have been violated in some awesome fashion. Even feminists espousing homicide against men as just desserts and suicide as a *Lysistrata*-like withholding of sex or socio-therapeutic mechanism of self-control join the fray. With the recent lethal subway explosions in Moscow allegedly perpetrated by two female suicide terrorists from the Caucasus (see Clifford Levy's March 30th article and the April 2nd and April 3rd articles by Clifford Levy and Ellen Barry in *The New York Times*), let's take a look at research that might help us explain and understand.

Mia Bloom, Associate Professor at Pennsylvania State University's Schools of International Studies and Women's Studies (and no relation to the IBPP editor), has worked on a book entitled "Bombshell: Women and Terror" to be published in 2010 by Penguin Press and an article "Death Becomes Her: The Changing Role of Women and Terrorism" to be published in 2010 by the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. But already in "Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend" from the Winter 2007 Issue of *Daedalus*, Bloom writes that motives vary and include "...to avenge a personal loss, to redeem the family name, to escape a life of sheltered monotony and achieve fame, or to equalize the patriarchal societies in which they live (p. 2)". As she notes online at *America.gov* – Engaging the world on May 11, 2007, it is often counterproductive and just plain wrong to look for things that went wrong and to accept a still common assumption that the female suicide terrorist must be "...depressed, crazy, suicidal, or psychopathic, and overwhelmingly, that it must have been a man who made her do it." In fact, the very notion that men and women, respectively, have different reasons for engaging in terrorism or that either or both have general patterns may also be suspect. Bloom's work encompasses different terrorist groupings including but not limited to the Middle East, Sri Lanka, and Chechnya.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

In the proceedings of a March 2007 workshop jointly sponsored by the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the Jebson Center for Counter-Terrorism Studies, Tufts University, Anne Speckhard, Adjunct Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Georgetown University Medical School and Professor of Psychology, Vesalius College, Free University of Brussels, presents on linking “psychological vulnerabilities” to women suicidal terrorism. In this presentation entitled “The Psychology of Suicide Terrorists: A Distinctive Typology or Identity?” she stresses the importance of the perpetrators residing in a conflict zone as modulating the robustness of vulnerability variables. In the context of Europe, she also focuses on the causal contributions of being a third-generation immigrant, “alienated,” and living in a segregated urban environment.

More germane to the recent events in Moscow, Speckhard co-authored a chapter with Khapta Akhmedova in 2006 entitled “Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists, in Yoram Schweitzer’s edited book *Female Suicide Terrorists*. According to Speckhard and Akhmedova, none of the Chechen female suicide bombers they study can be characterized with a serious personality disorder prior to deciding to join a terrorist group, but all experience deep personal traumatization, including elements of post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative phenomena. This traumatization seems significantly related to the loss of a loved one at the hands of an enemy. Terrorist behavior might then be construed as revenge and as partially based on a Wahabbist religious ideology and group dynamics from a new in-group (fellow conspirators) that serves as a partial salve for the trauma. Wide-spread community support for suicidal terrorism seems to be insignificant, but this is judged potentially ready to change as it already has within some Palestinian communities. Also, these Chechen female terrorists seem to be self-recruited. Presciently, Speckhard and Akhmedova conclude that “Chechen female bombers will continue to be a grave threat to Russian national security.”

Three years before Yoram Schweitzer edited *Female Suicide Terrorists*, he wrote an October 2003 paper entitled “Female Suicide Bombers for God” in *Tel Aviv Notes*. One of many contributions from this paper includes the dilemmas posed to terrorist recruiters before they decide to select female suicidal terrorists. Socio-cultural [including religious] strictures against female violence pose resistance to blithely seeking the tactical advantages. Schweitzer also provides a narrative based on a range of countries and national-cultural contexts and in both secular and religious organizations that reveals few motivational differences between men and women suicidal terrorists. To Schweitzer, the usual motivational suspects include limited life experience and innocence, psychological and political enthusiasm, loss of focus, and often personal distress and thirst for revenge. These are then exploited through indoctrination and manipulation by representatives of terrorist organizations, groups, and networks. What is offered to the female suicide terrorist are a life course and sense of direction, magic solutions to problems, and rewards in the material world and the world beyond.

A 2005 paper entitled “Female Suicide Terrorism-Consequences for Counter-terrorism” Issued by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Technical Expert Group on Suicide Terrorism describes “logics of terrorism” generating motivation as opposed to irrational psychologies—an approach going back at least as far as Professor Martha Crenshaw’s well-cited chapter in Walter Reich’s edited 1988 volume *Origins of Terrorism. Psychologies, Ideologies, Theories, States of Mind..* The paper takes an ambivalent stance about whether suicidal terrorism allows women to finally become equal in a world wherein women are too often accorded inferior status. This theme of the female suicidal terrorist as victim versus victimizer seems to demand explanation and understanding by researchers and mass-media representatives much more often than for male counterparts.

Debra Zedalis, a researcher at the Strategic Studies Institute of United States Army War College, in a paper entitled “Female Suicide Bombers” describes the benefits for successful terrorist operations of female suicide operatives. These benefits include simplicity and low cost, the potential for desired mass casualties, the great psychological impact on the general public and mass media, and the tactical advantage—until of course there is no longer a surprise factor and violation of sociocultural expectations. She also furnishes a host of demographic, psychological, and social factors correlated with subpopulations of female suicide terrorists, including a positive correlation between formal education and the commission of terrorism, being “brainwashed” from childhood, being conditioned by psychologists, being drugged during training and during the mission, and receiving approval from formal religious authorities.

Cindy Ness, a research fellow at the Center on Terrorism within the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, edited a 2008 volume entitled “Female Terrorism and Militancy Agency, Utility, and Organization.” Besides contributions from Debra Zedalis, Anne Speckhard, Khapta Akhmedova, and Yoram Schweitzer, there is a chapter on females as weapons of terror in Uganda and Sierra Leone by Susan McKay, Professor, Women’s Studies, University of Wyoming. (One might argue that these women seem to be more typical of subpopulations in Africa who constitute paramilitary cadres engaged in war crimes.) Ness has often advocated that a rhetoric of martyrdom permeates the motivation for female suicide terrorism both for sacred and secular causes.

Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank contributed an article entitled “Meet the new face of terror” in the Washington Post of August 12, 2007. They write the following about female suicide terrorism: “Surprised? Don’t be. Female participation in jihadist groups and operations have grown alarmingly in recent years. And unless we come to terms with the phenomenon, female Islamist militants might be an important part of our future.” Bergen and Cruickshank ascribe this to a sense of total war and existential crisis because Islamic territory is under attack, the deft usage of images labeled as atrocities perpetrated by the United States Government, and the political and religious justification for female martyrdom through selective communications of words and images. One phenomenon troubling Bergen and Cruickshank is the growing participation of Western-born Muslim women in various terrorist activities. Another is that the use of women in terrorism seems to be increasingly shaming at least some men to also get involved—men who ordinarily might not. (Bergen and Cruickshank attribute this observation to the work of terrorism analyst Farhana Ali who has worked with the Rand Corporation among many other entities.)

In a New York Times article from August 2, 2008 entitled “Behind the woman behind the bomb,” Lindsey O’Rourke, a doctoral student in political science at the University of Chicago, again rejects the notion that female suicide terrorism is largely and in general caused by despair, mental illness, religiously mandated subordination to men, and frustration with sexual inequality. Instead, she posits the significance of anger at foreign military occupation of one’s homeland—a thesis promulgated by one of her mentors, Robert Pape, a professor political science at the University of Chicago who wrote *Dying to win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. O’Rourke’s article generated some very sophisticated cross-talk among Mia Bloom, Yoram Schweitzer, Farhana Ali, and others that is worth reading and thinking about on the Middle East Strategy at Harvard site under the auspices of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs.

I’ll conclude with a few more examples of both contemporary and older research. Karla Cunningham, who holds the Hillman Chair in Politics at Chatham University and has been a Rand analyst, has applied evolutionary theory to explain the possible adaptiveness of female suicide terrorism in “Female Survival

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Calculations in Politically Violent Settings: How Political Violence and Terrorism Are Viewed as Pathways to Life” from *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (July 2009). In the same journal, she has identified counterterrorism deficiencies towards female suicide terrorism (see “Countering Female Terrorism” (February 2007)). Claudia Brunner who has been a lecturer with the University of Vienna and a researcher at the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies at Humboldt University has attempted to implicate Western epistemology in perpetuating global asymmetrical power relations, which, in turn, engender and nurture female suicide terrorism.

Rand international policy analysts R. Kim Cragin and Sara Daly have written *Women as Terrorists: Mothers, Recruiters, and Martyrs*, which includes terrorist violence from Colombia, South Africa, the Philippines, and Northern Ireland. It also differentiates the various terrorism roles which women can and do support—logisticians, recruiters, suicide bombers, operational leaders and fighters, and political vanguards. And I’ll conclude with two almost atavistic examples. First, Deborah Galvin describes how female sexuality inevitably modifies terrorist group dynamics and ascribes female participation in terrorism as compensatory for being “counterphobic” and for “inner and even unconscious feelings of dependency and vulnerability” in the 1983 edition of *Behavioral Sciences and Law*. Second, French analyst Fatima Lahnait revisits female suicide terrorism as a reaction to low societal standing and gender-specific, special explanations in Mary Sharpe’s edited volume (2008) *Suicide Bombers: The Psychological, Religious, and Other Imperatives* based on a NATO Advanced Research Workshop on Suicide Bombers.

Back to the Moscow subway bombings. Look at the April 3rd *The New York Times* front page photo from Newsteam via Associated Press of Dzhanel Abdullayeva, one of the alleged bombers. Read the article accompanying the photo by Levy and Barry. One may then believe that this is the classic story of a good girl made bad by the wrong man. After even a brief familiarization with the extant research on female suicide terrorism, however, one might well throw this belief away. Who’s killing whom and what killing means and refers to are still open questions. So is the notion that all life is worth prolonging by any means necessary. And women, the font of life, may choose to kill and die for many reasons or no reason. Regardless, they live anew by escaping the living death of the polis’s life and death control. Jane Russell, Freddy Mercury, and Alice Kramden may make unlikely bedfellows, but the bed is not a Procrustean one. [Comments may be sent to bloomr@erau.edu]

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