



**BACKGROUND PAPER**

**ON**

**- Female Suicide Terrorism -  
Consequences for Counter-terrorism**

*OSCE Technical Expert Workshop on Suicide Terrorism*

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## INTRODUCTION

*“It is a woman who teaches you today a lesson in heroism, who teaches you the meaning of Jihad, and the way to die a martyr’s death ... It is a woman who has shocked the enemy, with her thin, meagre, and weak body ... It is a woman who blew herself up, and with her exploded all the myths about women’s weakness, submissiveness, and enslavement.”*

“It’s a Woman!” Editorial, *Al-Sha’ab*, 1 February 2002

Terrorism is one of the most significant causes of instability in the current security environment. The OSCE comprehensive approach is one of co-operative security based on democracy, respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. Within this the OSCE has committed to mainstreaming a gender perspective throughout all its activities. The integration of a gender perspective, in any analysis and policy, can in turn aid in enhancing the understanding of the factors that may lead to armed conflict and help in developing a more constructive formulation of response options.

As the threat of terrorism has become increasingly global, it becomes increasingly important to look at society as a whole with all its potential actors in a holistic effort to combat terrorism.

In formulating counter-measures it is therefore important to keep in mind where the actors have their foundations, their motivations, including the societal and the political context in which they find their support and motivation. Understanding the motivational factor behind why actors get involved in violent “extremism” or terrorism, may give us an idea of what challenges a society is facing. The OSCE Bucharest Plan of Action (2001) recognises that “No circumstance or cause can justify acts of terrorism. At the same time, there are various social, economic, political and other factors, including violent separatism and extremism, which engender conditions in which terrorist organizations are able to recruit and win support”. By integrating a gender perspective may provide us with a more holistic approach to addressing the factors that engender terrorism. The Bucharest Plan of Action further calls on the ODIHR to assist participating States to act in accordance with the rule of law, democratic values and human rights when they take measures to counter terrorism.

Our stereotype media-made terrorist is often male, ageing between 18 – 35 years old. It seems that the majority of those who commit violent acts of terrorism are men. There is, however, a sizeable number of women who are members of radical organisations, and recent attention has been given to women as actors in suicide attacks, for instance in Chechnya and Uzbekistan.

In late March and early April 2004, a series of violent attacks including explosions reportedly set off by several female suicide bombers in the Uzbek capital Tashkent claimed the lives of an estimated 47 people. Similarly, female suicide bombers have

been involved in a number of other incidents both in a number of different conflicts. Women have been involved in a wide range of tasks in support of terrorist activity, and the concept of “the female terrorist” is not a new one. Increasingly also it is seen that female involvement is widening, both in context and form.

Men are traditionally seen as having a certain familiarity with violence – whether as defenders or aggressors, they are expected to “know how to fight”.<sup>1</sup> Women, by contrast, are associated with nurturing and caring. They are perceived as the protectors and givers of life, rather than the destroyers. If the male members of a movement committed to violence are perceived as mad, bad and evil, how much more then are the females? In taking up arms they commit a double atrocity: using violence, and in the process destroying our perceived safe, innocent and traditional view of women.

By looking at the motivations of both the women who have become activists – and the organisations that recruit them we may be a step closer in developing targeted and long-term counter-terrorism measures. Increasing acceptance of female suicide bombing might also have consequences for both the development of terrorism and thus of great importance therefore when assessing the threat and subsequent counter-measures.

Women’s involvement in suicide bombings opens up a whole range of questions, from motivational aspects and recruitment, but also on the consequences for the development of terrorism and the consequences for counter-terrorism. While states have legitimate security concerns in this regard, any counter-terrorism measures introduced must be in accordance with international law, in particular human rights standards. The process of integrating a gender perspective into all stages of both terrorism prevention and in formulating counter-terrorism measures and strategies ensures not only that women’s role in society as a whole and their role in addressing factors that may engender terrorism is addressed, but may also result in addressing particular gender concerns in counter-terrorism strategies.

The purpose of this paper is to look at some of the gender aspects of suicide bombings, and the possible consequences an increase in female suicide bombers may have on, firstly terrorism, and secondly the challenges entailed in developing counter-terrorism measures to address this trend.

## **MOTIVATIONAL ASPECTS**

Women’s involvement in suicide terrorism highlights several general themes within the study of terrorism. This relates to both why an actor gets involved and also questions of recruitment.

In understanding the motivational aspects of why an actor gets involved in terrorism, it is important to first look at a few “logics of terrorism”:<sup>2</sup> Terrorism represents the

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<sup>1</sup> M. Tiernay, “Young, gifted and ready to kill,” *The Herald*, Glasgow, UK, 3 August 2002, via FBIS

<sup>2</sup> See for instance M. Crenshaw, “The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice,” in (Ed.) W. Reich, *Origins of terrorism. Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Washington, D.C., 1998, pp. 7 – 24

outcome of a *learning process*. Terrorism is likely to be a reasonably informed choice among available alternatives tried out through time. Also terrorists tend to learn from the experiences of others usually and increasingly so, communicated to them via the news media. This also relates to the idea of *actor innovation*. In an increasingly difficult operational environment, organisations have to innovate to reach out with their message. Terrorist organizations adapt to higher levels of external pressure by altering their techniques and targets. Increasingly, organisations have to innovate to gain *strategic advantage*. The “surprise” element is also of importance. Constant *adaptation* to the surrounding security challenges remains an aspect, and as a result terrorist organizations tend to be highly adaptive and pragmatic. Organizations innovate to exploit external conditions, and may therefore select targets considered taboo, “theatres” where violence is unexpected, or engage new actors who will surprise.

As such, the inclusion of women as terrorist actors can be seen a strategic move. The question becomes whether she is used as a “weapon” for organizational purposes, and thus indirectly a victim or whether she actively and consciously herself gives her life to the “cause” in which she believes in.

### **Equality in death?**

Trying to explain *why* an individual woman engages in a violent terrorist act – becomes necessary because there is according to most observers something not quite “natural” about a female suicide bomber.<sup>3</sup> A woman is often perceived as a *victim* of violence or of society, as widows or mothers, or as passive supporters – part of a support network. She symbolises the guardian of tradition, a symbol of motherhood and life. How can she then, seemingly contradictory to this, give her life to violence and death?

There is an increasing fascination among many observers as to why women for a long time have joined and participated in radical movements. Politics and especially revolutionary politics have traditionally been regarded as male affairs and arenas – and as a result historians and researchers have never really had to explain why an individual man chose to enter political activity. If there is a notion of consequences of women joining political movements, it is more that they will change an organization to more “female” values, arguably values and forms of engagement that are perceived as more non-violent, democratic and humane.<sup>4</sup>

General assumptions are that women join for personal reasons, because of a personal relationship with a man or a personal tragedy – such as the death of a family member or rape. A woman is thus a victim of her surroundings and forced into a *contextual atmosphere* that encourages her to devote her life to radical activities. In many situations this is the case, the female activist is a product of her society and her personal story, and they will tend to use this as a motivational argument. Some Chechen women, for example, say they are more willing to give themselves to suicide

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<sup>3</sup> “Dressed to kill,” *Shark Blog*, April 2002, [http://www.usefulwork.com/shark/Dressed\\_to\\_Kill.jpg](http://www.usefulwork.com/shark/Dressed_to_Kill.jpg)

<sup>4</sup> S. Emmanuel, “The Female Militant Romanticized,” *Women in Action*, April 2002

missions after seeing their brothers, husbands and fathers dying in battle or disappearing while in the custody of Russian security forces.<sup>5</sup>

There is an ongoing debate both among women activists and researchers on whether the motivation to join a political violent movement lies on an individualistic or a collective level. Liberation may be conceptualised individually seen as the use of women in war as part of a larger vision to liberate women from the bonds of tradition.<sup>6</sup>

This however undermines the woman's motivation and belief in the cause she, or her people, is fighting - and giving up one's life - for a cause. Interviews done by several authors on the subject seem to indicate that women do express the same motivations – the national cause, the fight for their people's rights, and the willingness to fight for this in the same way as men.<sup>7</sup> Women show strong motivations for the political cause, and in most cases consciously decide to devote their life – and give their life - to this struggle.

Interviews done indicate that women's motivation for committing terrorist acts have increased in a number of conflict zones. Conflicts that are long-term have lower barriers and are less worried about breaking social and cultural taboos. Necessity drives society into a new phase.<sup>8</sup> Interviews with women who are themselves involved in radical organizations, or family members of female activists, point towards an expressed willingness, sympathy and legitimisation for female participation, not only as supporters but also as actors in the most violent acts. The young generation of Chechen women for instance show an increasing acceptance to female suicide bombings. This is contrary to their mothers' generation.<sup>9</sup>

Developments within radical Islamic movements have long been seen as the most traditional. The exception is the Palestinian case. In September 1970 Leila Khaled, together with a male accomplice, attempted to seize an El Al flight. Even though she failed she was seen by her generation as a heroine, she shattered a million taboos and revolutionised the thinking of hundreds of other angry young women around the world. Most importantly however: "Leila Khaled achieved in a few hours what the lives and deaths of hundreds of other Palestinian fighters have failed to do either before or since: she grabbed the attention of the world's media and held it enthralled."<sup>10</sup> Since January 2002, however, a number of Palestinian suicide bombers have been female. Research shows that even if they had very personal grievances, stories and motivations behind their involvement, the bottom line was their belief in the "cause" they were fighting for and a willingness to die so that political attention would be put on their people's suffering.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "“I suspected I had to commit a suicide-attack.” A surviving suicide bomber answers questions of Izvestia from a ‘Lefortovo’ cell,” *Izvestia*, No. 18 (26575), 3 February 2004, pp. 1-13

<sup>6</sup> K. J. Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26 (3) (May - June 2003), p. 181

<sup>7</sup> See for example Cunningham, Delaney and Neumann, MacDonald

<sup>8</sup> E. MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First*, Fourth Estate, London, 1991: 10

<sup>9</sup> "“I suspected I had to commit a suicide-attack.” A surviving suicide bomber answers questions of Izvestia from a ‘Lefortovo’ cell,” *Izvestia*, No. 18 (26575), 3 February 2004, pp. 1-13

<sup>10</sup> E. MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First*, Fourth Estate, London, 1991: 97

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

Another motivational factor that seems to be apparent is the aim for fame and recognition. The image of heroism is important to a number of organisations. Women of the ETA have, for example, according to the author Eileen MacDonald, expressed it as the only opportunity of becoming equal to men.<sup>12</sup>

The recognition that women receive more attention than men doing the same act seemed to be a strategy understood both by the organisation (which will be looked at below) and by the woman herself. “We know that the audience will be shocked by seeing that it is the same woman who gives life, who also takes life.”<sup>13</sup>

The motivations are mixed and many, they do however indicate that the women who have been active in radical organizations are very much aware of their role and position. They believe themselves to be equal to men, capable of doing the same tasks, and just as committed to the political goal as men. Also they do not see themselves as forced into a role by the male section of the population. Rather by contextual circumstances, the wider societal context.<sup>14</sup>

## Recruitment

By addressing the factors for why women are attractive for radical organisations, why they are recruited and “operationalized”, one may be able to understand the threat we face, and the ways in which to better develop counter-measures to these threats. In addition analysis of such involvement may shed light on factors that engender conflict and recruitment to terrorist acts.

Both the logic of terrorism and the strategic elements of terrorism involve a discussion of a logic development in the means and tactics used by terrorist organizations. As such the recruitment of women is seen as a logical next step in an increasingly tighter security environment. Women are seen as effective actors in that with their innocence they will avoid detection in nearly every context. Their perceived non-threatening nature, together with the taboos associated with the woman’s body, clothing and performance gives her a special advantage in that she can infiltrate the enemy in an innovative and deeper way. She can commit an act in, but also gather intelligence from, new and broader arenas.

Terror organisations are aware of the *value* a female member represents as a weapon in reaching out. By using women as active actors, such as in a suicide mission, one can play on established prejudices and presuppositions. Women are not seen as the typical terrorist, and have traditionally been seen as the grieving widow or mother. In times when one has to constantly innovate to reach out, the limits to what is acceptable becomes lower. The taboos surrounding female involvement may become blurred, and simultaneously the *message* that is sent out may be stronger.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>13</sup> Y. Schweitzer, “Female suicide bombers for God,” *Tel Aviv Notes*, No. 88, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 9 October 2003

<sup>14</sup> A. B. Delaney and P. R. Neumann, “The spectacular rise of the female terrorist,” *International Herald Tribune*, 6 September 2004

An understanding of terrorism should involve the issue of communication. Terrorists want to, and need to, *communicate* their message to the outside world and an audience. Symbolically female participation in terrorism sends a powerful message, blurring the distinction between perpetrator and victim. It is as if when “women decide to violate all established norms about the sanctity of human life, they do so only as a last resort.”<sup>15</sup> In this way using women as a last resort could be a symbol of the utter desperation of the cause, but also of the conflict. “If a woman was involved, the media focused on “what made her do it,” not on the carnage that she had created. (...) .. if the attacker was a woman , it was the bomber who became the victim, and whose grievances needed to be addressed.”<sup>16</sup>

As she does not fit our notion of what a terrorist should look like, she shocks us even more. As the writer Jessica Stern has noted, “the perception that women are less prone to violence, the Islamic dress code and the reluctance to carry out body searches on Muslim women made them the “perfect demographic.”<sup>17</sup> Operational imperatives, where males face obstacles, women may be able to perform better.

Operationally and strategically therefore a woman can be seen as useful and crucial actors to an organization.

## **CONSEQUENCES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TERRORISM**

While men are seen as having a certain familiarity with violence – women, by contrast, are associated with nurturing and caring. In taking up arms, and using violence, they “destroy” our safe, innocent and traditional view of women. This may be a powerful weapon for use in suicide missions. In addition, research seems to indicate that there is no difference in the act that a woman executes and that of a man. That is, *once* the subject is given the responsibility to commit an act he or she does it with the same perfection.

The point that is made is however that, women are by society, portrayed as “less likely offenders”, and as such more innocent. This makes her, according to strategic terrorist planning an interesting weapon in both recognisance and execution. Some writers have stressed the point made by some anti-terrorist squads that the less violent sex is regarded as more lethal. “Shoot the women first,” was their message, as the women would be seen as more committed to the act and as such more violent.<sup>18</sup>

The trend seems to be that even if the supporting role of women will remain constant, there is also a widening female involvement in all aspects of terrorism activity.

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<sup>15</sup> A. B. Delaney and P. R. Neumann, “The spectacular rise of the female terrorist,” *International Herald Tribune*, 6 September 2004, <http://www.iht.com/bin/print.php?file=537338.html>

<sup>16</sup> A. B. Delaney and P. R. Neumann, “The spectacular rise of the female terrorist,” *International Herald Tribune*, 6 September 2004, <http://www.iht.com/bin/print.php?file=537338.html>

<sup>17</sup> Jessica Stern, cited in A. B. Delaney and P. R. Neumann, “The spectacular rise of the female terrorist,” *International Herald Tribune*, 6 September 2004,

<http://www.iht.com/bin/print.php?file=537338.html>

<sup>18</sup> E. MacDonald, *Kill the Women first*, Fourth Estate, London, 1991:11

Arguably this can be seen as a logical and strategic progression in women's operational roles within various organizations.<sup>19</sup> There may be two reasons for this:

- Terrorist organizations operate under increasingly heavy government pressure and are forced to “innovate” to regain a strategic advantage
- Women's motivation for joining terrorist groups has also increased in a number of worsening conflict zones

Increasing contextual pressures motivate both organizations to recruit women and women themselves are motivated to join.<sup>20</sup> This widening trend is seen ideologically; that is in both ethnic-national and religious organizations, logistically; in all the activities that constitute a terrorist act, and geographically; the trend is not particular to a certain geographical context, although one should take into account the conflict context.

When not playing the role in terrorist acts directly, some women support men's militancy in their traditional roles as mothers nurturing families committed to militarist or terrorist acts.<sup>21</sup> In many societies women have been traditionally charged with passing on cultural norms and expectations of their communities to sons and daughters. When these norms include the use of violence for political ends, women encourage the radicalism and militaristic self-sacrifice that lead to terrorist acts. Women in this way also bring moral weight to militarist movements and encourage involvement in them.

The interesting aspect is however that even though women continue in most contexts to fill their most traditional roles, their involvement is widening also as high-profile operatives. One example is in 2002, when Chechen terrorists took 700 hostages in a Moscow theatre, 18 of the kidnappers were women. In Israel, the first female suicide bombers appeared in the same year, and groups like Islamic Jihad and Hamas have since “liberalised” their recruitment policies to allow females to join their ranks.

Strategists both on the recruitment side and on the counter-terrorism side have seen that this opens a whole new demographic pool. The two arguments that have been looked at in this study are firstly, from an operational point of view: terrorist organizations operate under increasingly heavy government pressure and are forced to “innovate” to regain a strategic advantage. Women also open up access to new arenas, and as such may be able to reach the enemy in new and innovative ways. And secondly, from the activist's point of view: women's motivation for joining terrorist groups has also increased in a number of worsening conflict zones. Both the organization (the recruiters) and the women express a conscious decision in recruitment and participation.

This arguably shows that the shift is not necessarily ideological and reflecting equality in society as a whole, but rather a practical necessity within an organisation and a

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<sup>19</sup> K. J. Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26 (3) (May - June 2003)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>21</sup> (Eds.) C. O. N. Moser and F.C. Clark, *Victims, Perpetrators, or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict, and Political Violence*, Zed Books, London, 2001



society. Strategically female participation opens up a whole new demographic pool, but also many possibilities for innovation.

## **CONSEQUENCES FOR COUNTER-TERRORISM**

In formulating counter-measures there is a strong understanding of the importance to keep in mind where the actors have their foundations, their motivations, including the societal and the political context.

Understanding the motivational factors behind why actors get involved in violent acts, may give us an idea of what challenges a society is facing, and in turn the factors that engender conditions in which terrorist organizations are able to recruit and win support. Women are, by both society and importantly counter-terrorism officials, portrayed as “less likely offenders”, and as such more innocent. This makes her, according to strategic terrorist planning an interesting weapon for organisations in both recognisance and execution.<sup>22</sup>

Increasing contextual pressures motivate both organizations to recruit women and at the same time women themselves are motivated to join.<sup>23</sup> This widening trend is seen ideologically; that is in both ethnic-national and religious organizations, logistically; in all the activities that constitute a terrorist act, and geographically; the trend is not particular to a certain geographical context, although one should take into account the conflict context.

In face of this trend, this brings out a number of questions for counter-terrorism officials in developing strategies when meeting female suicide bombers. Are there specific concerns that need to be taken? In addition, focus must be put on the way the “audience”, researchers, practitioners, law enforcement officials and counter-terrorism officials see female terrorism. Several researchers have emphasised the point that once a woman is seen as the actor deeper questions are asked as to why the act was committed and what the personal story behind might be. Interestingly, a woman is portrayed more as part of a wider/broader society: In her, and in trying to explain the background for an act, lies the “reasoning” of her society and its injustices.

Concern is raised that in conducting investigation into these attacks fundamental human rights may be at risk. As women increasingly are seen as actors, law-enforcement officers will have to focus their attention more on women. When police conduct searches, house or body-searches certain concerns have to be kept in mind and respected. Women as active parts of civil society have also been subject to rounds of arrests that have been rife with violations of legal procedure. Whatever counter-measures are put in place, international law, and in particular human rights standards must be respected to prevent violence against women.

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<sup>22</sup> E. MacDonald, *Kill the Women first*, Fourth Estate, London, 1991:11

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*

## OSCE COMMITMENTS

The OSCE Ministerial Council approved at its meeting in Bucharest in December 2001 a ‘Decision on Combating Terrorism’ where OSCE participating States pledged to ‘defend freedom and protect their citizens against acts of terrorism, fully respecting international law and human rights’.<sup>24</sup> A year later the Ministerial Council adopted the ‘OSCE Charter on Preventing and Combating Terrorism’ which states that OSCE participating States consider it ‘of utmost importance to complement the ongoing implementation of OSCE commitments on terrorism with a reaffirmation of the fundamental and timeless principles on which OSCE action has been undertaken and will continue to be based in the future, and to which participating States fully subscribe’.<sup>25</sup> It also contained an undertaking for participating States to ‘conduct all counter-terrorism measures in accordance with the rule of law, the United Nations Charter and relevant provisions of international law, international standards of human rights, and where applicable, international humanitarian law’.

The Bucharest Plan of Action (2001) calls on the ODIHR to assist participating States to act in accordance with the rule of law, democratic values and human rights when they take measures to counter terrorism.

The OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality (2004) specifically mentions that “The Action against Terrorism Unit (ATU) will upon request take action on the issue of the exploitation of women by terrorists to serve their own ends and propagate extremist ideologies.”<sup>26</sup>

The process of integrating a gender perspective into all the stages of both terrorism prevention and in formulating counter-terrorism measures and strategies ensures that the concerns of men and women are equally considered, to the benefit of society as a whole. In sum, the integration of a gender perspective into counter-terrorism practices could generate more practical, accurate and realistic results on which to base the formulation of strategies. By becoming more comprehensive, the response and strategies could also become more effective, more targeted and more beneficial to society in the long run.

It is in the light of the above commitments of OSCE participating States that this paper has looked at the specific concerns with regard to increased female suicide bombings. Where states fail to respect human rights in their counter-terrorism efforts, they undermine the sense of trust and security in the very communities that they are trying to protect from terrorist acts. The damage that can be done in terms of fomenting a climate of alienation and mistrust in which the potential for radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism is exacerbated is incalculable.

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<sup>24</sup> Decision No 1 on Combating Terrorism, adopted by the OSCE Ministerial Council in Bucharest, 4 December 2001 (MC(9).DEC/1).

<sup>25</sup> OSCE Charter on Preventing and Combating Terrorism, adopted by the OSCE Ministerial Council in Porto, 7 December 2002 (MC(10).JOUR/2).

<sup>26</sup> Decicion No 14/04 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality, 7 December 2004 (MC. DEC/14/04).