What motivates female suicide terrorists?

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Abstract
Female suicide terrorism is increasing worldwide. The phenomenon is shocking to many because it runs counter to the widespread perception of women as nonviolent. Questions have arisen concerning the motivations of these women, and different theories have been proposed. Some have alleged that female terrorists are motivated by psychological problems or by the will to avenge a personal tragedy. Other theorists argue that women are fighting to achieve gender equality, since the societies they live in are often extremely patriarchal. Yet others believe that women are motivated by the same reasons as their male counterparts: nationalistic or religious fanaticism. Whatever might be their motivation, it is clear that terrorist organizations employ women because they offer a number of important benefits. It is possible that, in a sense, female suicide terrorism is just another expression of gender oppression.
Most of the time, however, women help terrorists groups in a different and more invisible way: they play an important secondary role by supporting the male terrorists and raising and educating new generations of terrorists. It is interesting that there seems to be systematic underestimation of the danger of the female terrorists. In order to develop an effective counter-terrorism policy, female terrorism needs to be analyzed on several levels.

Keywords: female terrorists, suicide terrorism, terrorist organizations.

Introduction

Suicide terrorism is gradually becoming the weapon of choice for terrorist organizations worldwide (Stark, n.d.) . The phenomenon is difficult to understand. The willingness to sacrifice oneself makes the threat of suicide terrorism incomprehensible, given that for most people it is impossible to even imagine committing such an act themselves (Alvanou, n.d.). What seems to be an even more puzzling development in terrorism is the increasing use of female suicide terrorists. The wide-spread assumption that women favor nonviolence gives female suicide terrorism an extra shock value. Secular and leftist terrorist organizations were the first to employ women, with Islamic religious terrorist groups following suit (O'Rourke, 2009) . This supports the claim that female involvement in terrorism is widening ideologically, logistically and regionally (Cunningham, 2003). Questions soon arose about the motivations of these women. This article provides an overview of the literature on the motivations of female suicide terrorists.

Female suicide terrorists and conventional suicide

The conclusions of the literature on the motivations of female suicide terrorists are not unanimous. Various theories explaining the phenomenon have been proposed. One account of the motivations of the female attackers is that they are driven to commit suicide for reasons that are similar to those behind conventional suicide. Such a similarity in motivation, which has never been proposed for male terrorists, has been challenged on several grounds. If the motivations of female suicide terrorists mirror those of persons who commit suicide conventionally, one would expect these two groups to have matching characteristics. Such is not the

case. Female suicide terrorists in general do not suffer from psychopathology, experience social isolation or substance dependence, which persons who commit suicide by conventional means do. Secondly, suicide attacks are very dissimilar to the non-violent ways in which women usually commit conventional suicide (O'Rourke, 2009). Considering these strong counterarguments, the so called 'psychological causes' explanation does not seem to be valid.

Personal motivations
A more widespread assumption in the literature on female terrorism seems to be that most women who become involved with terrorist organizations do so for personal reasons. One example of this would be a woman's relationship with a man within the organization although, more often, female terrorists seem to be motivated to avenge some personal tragedy, such as having been raped, or the death of a family member (Bloom, 2007; Stark, n.d.) .

Support for this theory comes from a study by Jacques and Taylor (2008). They proposed that, in order to establish a proper framework of the unique motivations of female terrorism, a statistical analysis of case studies is necessary. They compared 30 case studies of female terrorists with 30 case studies of male terrorists with respect to the prevalence of different types of motivations and indeed found that women were significantly more driven by personal reasons or the will to avenge than were men. Male suicide terrorism, on the other hand, was significantly more associated with religious and/or nationalistic motivations.

Further support for the 'personal reasons' explanation is provided by a group of female operatives in Chechnya. They are called 'the Black Widows' because many of them are wives, mothers or sisters of men killed in battles with federal troops. These personal losses seem to have motivated them to get involved in terrorism and fight back, even at the risk of their own lives (Bloom, 2007).

The belief that women are motivated solely by personal reasons creates the impression that women do not have a fundamental voice in creating new structures, an important goal of most terrorist organizations. Such a viewpoint might very well underestimate the dangers of female terrorists.

Female suicide terrorists as (feminist) freedom fighters
Another frequent claim emphasizes that female terrorists actually do want to bring about change in their societies. According to this viewpoint, the growing participation of women in terrorism in general, and especially in suicide terrorism, is a sign of the liberation of women and their attempt to attain a status equal to that of men (Berko, & Erez, 2006). The majority of the societies where female suicide attacks occur are extremely patriarchal. In these places, men are higher in the social hierarchy than women are. They must not only obey older women and men, but younger men as well. In these societies, women are restricted in their freedom to a great extent: their lives are usually limited to the home and the family (Berko, & Erez, 2006) Mia Bloom (2007) has argued that female terrorists want to achieve equality and change the gender roles prescribed by the societies they live in. Taking their place in terrorist organizations alongside their male peers may be seen as instrumental in achieving this goal (Stark, n.d.).

In addition, several theorists argue that women, like men, might be driven by nationalistic or religious reasons as well (Stark, n.d.). Furthermore, joining a terrorist organization might help women establish their identity (a motivation often attributed to male terrorists in the literature).

Therefore, motivations of female terrorism as appear to be rather complex, reflecting a combination of collectivist motivations, such as a desire for national independence, alongside individualist motivations such as the desire for equality between the sexes (Cunningham, 2003).

Organizational motivations
But there are a number of difficulties with the feminist and liberal approach, given that it seems very unlikely that the fundamentalist organizations employ women out of a sense of gender equality. Terrorist groups are very innovative when it comes to selecting taboo targets and locations where violence is not expected. Using women to carry out attacks may simply be seen as another form of innovation (Cunningham, 2003) and it seems as though the increasing recruitment of women is little more than a strategy (Bloom, 2007). Yet it is a clever strategy, given that using female terrorists has a number of advantages.

First, their attacks are more lethal than the attacks carried out by men. Lindsey O'Rourke (2009) analyzed all known suicide attacks between 1981 and July 2008 and found substantial differences in the effectiveness of suicide bombings committed by men and women. The average number of victims resulting from an attack conducted by a male acting alone is 5.3, while the number for attacks committed by a woman is 8.4. When working as a team, attacks conducted by women on average resulted in 8.3 victims, whereas team attacks by all-male terrorist commandos claim an average number of 3.6 victims. This higher degree of female terrorist lethality seems to be a direct result of the way in which gender aids women in avoiding detection. To begin with, women's generally non-threatening image may be sufficient to allay any suspicion that they might pose a danger.
Secondly, in most countries where female terrorist attacks occur, in-depth scrutiny of

a woman is seen as an affront to her honor. Lastly, the possibility that any pre-menopausal woman might be pregnant facilitates the concealment of weapons and bombs under maternity clothing (Cunningham, 2003).
A second major advantage of females to terrorist organizations is the higher level of media attention that female suicide bombers typically receive. The preconceived notion that women are nonviolent gives female suicide bombers the shock value so valued by terrorist organizations (Alvanou, n.d.). In addition, the employment of women makes the organization more threatening because the imagined barriers between terrorists and non-terrorists are erased by the attacks from the presumably nonviolent women. Female terrorism carries with it the message that terrorism is all around you (Bloom, 2007). A Chinese proverb summarizes the goal of terrorism as being "to kill one and frighten 10,000 others" (Cunningham, 2003). Female suicide attacks do exactly this, because it seems to many people particularly disturbing that persons associated with creating life carry out such horrendous and destructive acts (Alvanou,n.d).
Yet the portrayal of female terrorists in the media does not seem to be realistic. The media use gender stereotypes in emphasizing the looks of female terrorists, whereas no attention is given to the appearance of male terrorists (Nacos, 2005; Sela-Shayovitz, 2007). Furthermore, pictures of female terrorists most often show them screaming and crying, while their male counterparts are pictured carrying and using weapons (Sela-Shayovitz, 2007). Such images of women underestimate their danger, and should therefore not be the basis of counter-terrorism policies (Nacos, 2005).
Another advantage of women to terrorist groups is that they allow such organizations to grow and survive for a longer period of time (Jacques, & Taylor,

2008). Furthermore, organizations can use female terrorists to recruit more male terrorists, because men (especially in patriarchal societies) are sensitive to the message that women should not do the fighting for them, and this might motivate them to assert their masculinity by joining a terrorist group.

Female suicide attackers as victims of terrorist organizations

It thus appears that terrorist organizations benefit from women for different reasons. There is some evidence that this knowledge has led various organizations to the blackmail or coerce women to join them (Bloom, 2007; Stark, n.d.). Samira Ahmed Jassim, member of a terrorist organization, admitted that she organized the rape of 28 women and afterwards convinced them to commit suicide attacks (Stark, n.d.). This was possible because the terrorist organization that Jassim belonged to helped the women in two ways: not only did they "accept" them when the rest of society regards women that have been raped as disgraced. In addition, the organization enabled these women to restore their honor by committing a terrorist act. This shocking story shows that it might indeed be true that women join terrorist organizations for personal reasons, but the organizations themselves do not seem to be concerned about these motivations, and may even deliberately foster them.

Furthermore, stories like these destroy the view that female terrorists want to break out of traditional gender roles. Instead, they actually seem to embrace them, and commit the attacks because they think it is their only possible escape after failing to live up to their traditional roles (O'Rourke, 2009; Berko, & Erez, 2006). It would thus seem that women want to gain a dignity in death that escaped them in life, as Katharina von Knop (2007) puts it.

There is thus support for the claim that the female terrorists want to live up to the

gender roles society prescribes for them. It appears that female terrorists in general are single women who are generally too old to still be considered desirable marriage partners. Their societies place great emphasis on family and married life as the most important realm for females. As a consequence, women in such cultures might feel like failures if they do not marry, start a home and have children (O'Rourke, 2009).

Apparently, some terrorist groups cleverly exploit such feelings of inadequacy. Whereas organizations generally promise male terrorists that they will receive seventy-two virgins after their suicide attacks, they promise women an afterlife with either a glorious family, or eternal virginity. (Stark, n.d..) .

It can thus be concluded that terrorist organizations are not motivated to employ women out of a sense of empathy because they suffered a personal tragedy, or with the intention of promoting gender equality. In contrast, they exploit the vulnerabilities of women and recruit them in cunning ways.

Female terrorists in general do not have a history of organizational activity. Most often, they join the organizations shortly before they commit the attack. In this way, they do not achieve the high position and accompanying respect of their male peers, who are often involved in terrorist organizations for a long time before carrying out an attack. It therefore seems as if the women in the organization are usually subordinate to their male counterparts. Looking at it this way, the inclusion of women in suicidal terrorism is just another expression of the systematic gender oppression suffered by the women in these societies, and female terrorists can thus be more accurately seen as victims of oppressive social, religious and cultural systems, rather than as freedom fighters (Berko, & Erez , 2006).

Other female terrorists

It should be noted, however, that no matter what their motivations are, female suicide bombers are atypical because they tend to be the center of attention. In most societies where terrorism is rather common, women are almost "invisible" because their lives are typically limited to the private sphere. In addition, apart from the suicide bombers, most women involved in terrorism also play an invisible, albeit substantial role in terrorism. The only really outstanding role for women in terrorist organizations that the world audience perceives through the media is that of suicide bomber, but the other functions women fulfill, such as that of ideological supporter, are not any less important for the survival of the organizations and the maintenance of their operational capabilities and ideological motivation.

In an intriguing article, Katharina von Knop (2007) shows the multi-faceted roles women play within the terrorist movement of Al Qaeda. She notes that carrying out suicide attacks plays a subordinate role for the women in this movement. Instead, women in Al Qaeda function as operational facilitators by supporting their male relatives, and as ideological educators of their children. The importance of these functions should not be underestimated. While most women are indeed invisible, they have an intense impact on the current and future generations of terrorists. Moreover, women are often financially responsible for a terrorist group. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States closed various bank accounts that were managed by women on behalf of various terrorist organizations or related institutions. The women can deal with the finances from home, the place they are mostly restricted to in their societies.

No substantial literature is available on the motivations of these women, who are not perceived by the outside world, but it is suggested that most of them are the relatives or the wives of male members of Al Qaeda (von Knop, 2007). It may thus be the case that these women fundamentally differ from female suicide terrorists in that they actually have fulfilled their traditional gender roles in an exemplary manner, dedicating their lives to the home and family by supporting husbands, brothers and sons in their struggle against oppression.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the motivations of female terrorists have puzzled theorists because the phenomenon seems to be so counterintuitive (Alvanou, n.d.). Important questions concern whether female terrorists are motivated by reasons unique to women, or if they share the same motivations as men in joining terrorist groups.

A recurrent theme seems to be the underestimation of the danger of female terrorists. Both the 'psychological causes' and the 'personal reasons' explanations create the impression that women are not capable of playing a substantial role in the battles waged by terrorist organizations because they are not motivated to really change anything. The viewpoint that female terrorists are feminists, and that they enlist in the cause in order to achieve equality between the sexes, does not seem to be a valid one, because research indicates that many of the female suicide bombers actually commit their attacks because they feel they have not lived up to the prescribed gender roles in their societies, and they regard such attacks as the only way to restore their honor. This seems to suggest that such women are conventional rather than liberal (O'Rourke, 2009). Terrorist organizations might exploit the insecurities of the women in recruiting them. In this way, female suicide terrorists can be seen as victims of both their societies and the organizations that they serve (Berko, & Erez, 2006).

Yet this view also tends to underestimate the danger and influence of female suicide attackers. Furthermore, women also play a large but invisible role in supporting and maintaining the organizations. Because of the invisibility of these functions, it is easy to forget about the importance of women (Knop, 2007).

Mass media also seem to fail to fully appreciate the importance of female terrorism, as reflected in their use of stereotyped images (Nacos, 2005; Sela-Shayovitz, 2007). In creating an effective policy against female terrorism, it seems urgent to analyze it on the individual, organizational, and societal levels (Stark, n.d.). This is probably the only way to begin to understand this complex phenomenon.

Reflective paragraph

As the penultimate sentence of the above section states, female suicide terrorism is a subject that has to be studied on the individual, organizational, and societal level. It is a phenomenon that can only be understood (as far as this is possible at all) by looking at it from different perspectives in the social sciences.

In this article, I have tried to do this. It should be noted that the different levels interact. For example, some women might be motivated to break out of traditional gender roles (individual ánd societal level), while the terrorist organizations are motivated by their own organizational reasons. Every theory automatically raises a number of questions. The "personal motivations" theory, for instance, might raise the question as to why women would be more motivated by personal tragedies and the will to take revenge, than men. This is a question that could be answered by psychology. But it could also be studied by sociologists and anthropologists. Is it the societies these women live in that makes them more motivated by these reasons? This subject cannot be fully covered by any single discipline. Instead, different sciences must work together, and even then it is difficult to achieve a full understanding of the phenomenon of female suicide terrorism.

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