

# Mia Bloom

## *Female suicide bombers: a global trend*

Ever since Muriel Degauque, a Belgian convert to radical Islam, blew herself up in Iraq last November, questions have surfaced about the growing role of women in terrorism. Degauque's attack occurred on the same day that Sajida Atrous al-Rishawi's improvised explosive device (IED) failed to detonate at a wedding in Amman. This apparent growing trend of women bombers has the general public and counterterrorism specialists concerned because of its implication that women will be key players in future terrorist attacks.

Yet the recent focus on female suicide bombers neglects the long history of female involvement in political violence. In reality women have participated in insurgency, revolution, and war for a long time. Women have played prominent roles in the Russian Narodnaya Volya in the nineteenth century, the Irish Republican Army, the Baader-Meinhof organization in Germany, the Italian Red Brigades, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Historically, however,

women have mostly played supporting roles. "Society, through its body of rules and its numerous institutions, has conventionally dictated [women's] roles within the boundaries of militancy. Assisting in subordinate roles is welcomed and encouraged. Actually fighting in the war is not."<sup>1</sup> Most often, the primary contribution expected of women has been to sustain an insurgency by giving birth to many fighters and raising them in a revolutionary environment.

Women are now taking a leading role in conflicts by becoming suicide bombers – using their bodies as human detonators for the explosive material strapped around their waists. The first female suicide bomber, a seventeen-year-old Lebanese girl named Sana'a Mehaydali, was sent by the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP/PPS), a secular, pro-Syrian Lebanese organization, to blow herself up near an Israeli convoy in Lebanon in 1985, killing five Israeli soldiers. Of the twelve suicide attacks conducted by the SSNP, women took part in six of them. From Lebanon, the incidence of female bombers spread

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Frazier, "Abandon Weeping for Weapons: Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers," <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefe/joe/frazier.html> (accessed November 21, 2003).

to other countries – Sri Lanka, Turkey, Chechnya, Israel, and now Iraq. Out of the approximately seventeen groups that have started using the tactical innovation of suicide bombing, women have been operatives in more than half of them.<sup>2</sup> Between 1985 and 2006, there have been in excess of 220 women suicide bombers, representing about 15 percent of the total.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the upsurge in the number of female bombers has come from both secular and religious organizations, even though religious groups initially resisted using women.

Their participation in suicide bombings starkly contradicts the theory that women are more likely to choose peaceful mechanisms for conflict resolution than men are – that women are inherently more disposed toward moderation, compromise, and tolerance in their attitudes toward international conflict.<sup>4</sup> (In fact, most existing notions of women in the midst of conflict portray them as *victims* of war rather than as perpetrators.) Complicating these notions of femininity further is the fact that the IED is often disguised under a woman's clothing to make her appear pregnant, and so beyond suspicion or reproach. On April 25, 2006, Kanapathipillai Manjula Devi, used such a tactic to penetrate a military hospital in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Posing

as the wife of a soldier on her way to the maternity clinic, she gained access to the high-security facility.<sup>5</sup> She had even visited the maternity clinic for several weeks prior to her attack to maintain her cover.<sup>6</sup> The advent of women suicide bombers has thus transformed the revolutionary womb into an exploding one.

**W**hy do women become suicide bombers? Motives vary: 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.

In many instances, the women are seeking revenge. Consider, for example, the women who join the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which is based in the Tamil areas, in the northern and eastern provinces, of Sri Lanka.<sup>7</sup> According to anthropologist Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, the government has committed organized violence against the Tamils through a systematic campaign of disappearances, rape, checkpoint searches, and torture – as well as the elimination of whole villages in remote areas.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in the midst of conflict, the government forces have not been mindful to differentiate civilians from combatants and militants.

These oppressive tactics, along with civilian deaths, have soured the Tamil

*Female  
suicide  
bombers*

2 “From Jerusalem to Jakarta and from Bali to Baghdad, the suicide bomber is clearly the weapon of choice for international terrorists.” Quoting Don Van Natta, Jr., “Big Bang Theory: The Terror Industry Fields its Ultimate Weapon,” *New York Times*, August 24, 2003, sec. 4, 1.

3 Yoram Schweitzer, ed., *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?* Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Memorandum 84, August 2006, 8.

4 Emile Sahliyeh and Zixian Deng, “The Determinants of Palestinians’ Attitude Toward Peace with Israel,” *International Studies Quarterly* 47 (4) (December 2003): 701.

5 Arjuna Guwardena, “Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat,” in Schweitzer, ed., *Female Suicide Bombers*, 87.

6 Tamil sources, interview by Mia Bloom, July 2006.

7 In July 1997 three national human rights commissions established in 1994 found that there had been 16,742 disappearances since July 1988.

8 Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, interview by Mia Bloom, Colombo, Sri Lanka, October 25, 2002.

population on the government's assurances of devolution and equal rights, which in turn has emboldened the LTTE and solidified their control of Jaffna.<sup>9</sup> Rajasingham-Senanayake explains, "In this context militant groups who infiltrate camps have little difficulty in recruiting new cadres from deeply frustrated and resentful youth, men and women, girls and boys."<sup>10</sup> In fact, the atrocities need not even hurt a Tamil woman directly for her to join the LTTE, as long as they affect the Tamil community as a whole:

Witnessing rape ... hearing about rape from other villagers and the Army's killing of Tamil youth (girls and boys arrested by the Sri Lankan Army) ... and the feeling of helplessness in not being able to defend against the Sri Lankan Army are the main reasons for the girls joining the LTTE.<sup>11</sup>

As the example of the Tamil women demonstrates, women generally become involved, at least initially, for personal, rather than ideological, reasons. In Chechnya, to give another example, the female operatives are called 'Black Widows,' because many were the sisters, mothers, or wives of Chechen men killed in battles with federal troops.<sup>12</sup>

Zarema Muzhikhoyeva was one such widow. On July 10, 2003, she was arrest-

ed carrying a homemade bomb on Tverskaya-Yamskaya Ulitsa.

Muzhikhoyeva [admitted to having been] recruited by Chechen rebels as a suicide bomber, in exchange for \$1,000 in compensation to her relatives to repay for jewelry she had stolen from them ... When the rebels sent her to Moscow to carry out her mission, she changed her mind and got herself arrested by police.<sup>13</sup>

Muzhikhoyeva was the first bomber to be captured alive. When the court sentenced her to the maximum of twenty years despite the fact that she had opted not to explode her cargo, Muzhikhoyeva shouted, "Now I know why everyone hates the Russians!" – adding that she would return and "blow you all up."<sup>14</sup> This powerful image resonated throughout the Chechen community. Even though Muzhikhoyeva had done the right thing, the Russian court had not granted her any leniency, radicalizing her even more in the process.

However, while women usually become suicide bombers in response to a personal tragedy, some may also believe they can change their society's gender norms through militant involvement. According to Clara Beyler, a counterterrorism analyst in Washington, D.C., and formerly a researcher for the International Policy Institute for Counterterrorism in Herzliya, Israel,

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been a product of societal forces predisposing and molding them to become militants as an expression of Ayat, traditional Chechen mores (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cincinnati, forthcoming).

13 Anatoly Medetsky, "Court Tries Alleged Tverskaya Bomber," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 30, 2004.

14 Steven Lee Meyers, "From Dismal Chechnya, Women Turn to Bombs," *New York Times*, September 10, 2004.

9 Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation* (Cambridge, Mass.: World Peace Foundation and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 1999), 9.

10 Rajasingham-Senanayake in *ibid.*, 62.

11 Tamil sources, personal correspondence with the author, November 26, 2003.

12 There is some dispute about whether the Black Widows are in fact widows. Irina Bazarva argues that many are not widows but have

There is a difference between men and women suicide attackers: women consider combat as a way to escape the predestined life that is expected of them. When women become human bombs, their intent is to make a statement not only in the name of a country, a religion, a leader, but also in the name of their gender.<sup>15</sup>

Again, the Chechen Black Widows provide strong support for this idea. Historically, a woman's most relevant role in Chechen society was to raise children, form their characters, and make them strong so that they became warriors for the Islamic faith (*mujahideen*) when they grew up. Even after they were allowed to be a part of battles, female insurgents were initially used merely to supply medical aid, food, and water to the men; they also carried weapons and ammunition across enemy territory and maintained the guerrillas' morale. At the Dubrovka theater siege, for example, the men took care of the explosives and intimidation, while the women distributed medical supplies, blankets, water, chewing gum, and chocolate. Though the women allegedly toyed threateningly with their two-kilo bomb belts, they did not control the detonators – the men retained control of the remotes.<sup>16</sup>

The Black Widows, on the other hand, choose to die as a bomber in order to show the strength of the resistance. They can wear kamikaze bomb-belts, or drive a truck that is full of explosives. Chechen guerrillas are inspired with the image of Khava Barayeva – the first to walk the way

of martyrdom. Chechen rebels... write poems and songs about her.<sup>17</sup>

The use of female operatives, especially by a religious militant organization like the Chechen Al Ansar al-Mujahideen, is significant. Until recently, a female bomber was almost certainly sent by a secular organization. In effect,

[t]he growth in the number of Chechen female suicide bombers signaled the beginning of a change in the position of fundamentalist Islamic organizations regarding the involvement of women in suicide attacks – a change that [has since] become devastatingly apparent.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of violence empowering women had already spread through the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. On January 27, 2002, Wafa Idris became the first Palestinian woman to perpetrate an act of suicide terror. A twenty-seven-year-old aid worker for the Palestinian Red Crescent Society from the Al-Am'ari refugee camp near Ramallah, she was carrying a backpack with explosives:

The bomb in her rucksack was made with TNT packed into pipes. Triacetone triperoxide, made by mixing acetone with phosphate, is ground to a powder. In a grotesque parody of the domestic female stereotype, it is usually ground in a food mixer, before being fed into metal tubes.<sup>19</sup>

On the way to delivering it to someone else, she got stuck in a revolving door, detonating the explosives.<sup>20</sup> She killed

17 Ibid.

15 Clara Beyler, "Messengers of Death: Female Suicide Bombers," <http://www.ict.org.il/articles/articledet.cfm?articleid=470>.

16 Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, "Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists," in Schweitzer, *Female Suicide Bombers*, 63–90.

18 Yoram Schweitzer, "A Fundamental Change in Tactics," *Washington Post*, October 19, 2003, B03.

19 Giles Foden, "Death and the Maidens," *The Guardian*, July 18, 2003.

20 *Agence France Presse*, April 12, 2002.

one Israeli civilian and wounded 140 others.

Though her death was allegedly accidental, it instantly transformed her into a cult heroine throughout the Arab world. The military wing of Fatah, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, took responsibility for the attack three days later. Birzeit students appealed for more women to emulate Idris. Commenting on Idris's death, female students stated, "The struggle is not limited strictly to men . . . . It's unusual [for a Palestinian woman to martyr herself], but I support it . . . . Society does not accept this idea because it is relatively new, but after it happens again, it will become routine."<sup>21</sup> And in an editorial entitled, "It's a Woman!" *Al-Sha'ab* proclaimed:

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, meager, 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 is a woman who has now proven that the meaning of [women's] liberation is the liberation of the body from the trials and tribulations of this world . . . and the acceptance of death with a powerful, courageous embrace.<sup>22</sup>

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade even set up a special unit to train female suicide bombers and named it after Wafa Idris.<sup>23</sup> "We have 200 young women from the Bethlehem area alone ready to

sacrifice themselves for the homeland," bragged one Al-Aqsa leader.<sup>24</sup> Matti Steinberg, a former special advisor on Arab affairs to the Israeli government, described how a Hamas bimonthly publication – dedicated to women – was replete with letters to the editor from Palestinian women asking for permission to participate directly in the conflict and asserting their right to be martyrs.<sup>25</sup>

Palestinian women have torn the gender classification out of their birth certificates, declaring that sacrifice for the Palestinian homeland would not be for men alone; on the contrary, all Palestinian women will write the history of the liberation with their blood, and will become time bombs in the face of the Israeli enemy. They will not settle for being mothers of martyrs.<sup>26</sup>

This participation of Palestinian women in violence had global reverberations. In 2002, Indian security forces twice went on high alert, in January and again in August, to guard against possible attacks by female suicide bombers. The suspects sprang from two Pakistan-based Islamic organizations, Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba, both associated with Al Qaeda. In March 2003, *Asharq Al-Awsat* published an interview with a woman calling herself 'Um Osama,' the alleged leader of the women *mujahideen* of Al Qaeda. The Al Qaeda network claimed to have set up squads of female suicide bombers – purportedly including Afghans, Arabs, Chechens,

24 Graham Usher, "At 18, Bomber Became Martyr and Murderer," *The Guardian*, March 30, 2002.

25 Matti Steinberg, interview by Mia Bloom, September 2002.

26 According to Dr. Samiya Sa'ad Al-Din, *Al-Akhabar* (Egypt), February 1, 2002.

21 *Kul al-Arab* (Israel), February 1, 2002.

22 *Al-Sha'ab* (Egypt), February 1, 2002.

23 Sophie Claudet, "More Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers Could Be On The Way: Analysts," *Middle East Times*, March 1, 2002.

and other nationalities – under orders from bin Laden to attack the United States:

We are preparing for the new strike announced by our leaders, and I declare that it will make America forget . . . the September 11 attacks. The idea came from the success of martyr operations carried out by young Palestinian women in the occupied territories. Our organization is open to all Muslim women wanting to serve the (Islamic) nation . . .<sup>27</sup>

The involvement of Palestinian women in suicide bombings has also had an extreme impact on the cultural norms of Palestinian society. Palestinians have long had a set of rules that describe and limit gender roles (although Palestinian women have been mobilized politically since the 1960s). These rules have dictated the separation of the sexes and restricted women to the private sphere – particularly in rural areas. Through violence, women have placed themselves on the frontlines, in public, alongside men to whom they are not related. This has resulted in a double trajectory for militant Palestinian women – convincing society of their valid contributions while at the same time reconstructing the normative ideals of the society.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, it is difficult to ascertain whether terrorist organizations are actually employing women out of a heightened sense of gender equality. According to Farhana Ali, an international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation:

The liberal door that now permits women to participate in operations will likely

27 “Bin Laden Has Set Up Female Suicide Squads: Report,” *Arab News*, Dubai, March 13, 2003.

28 Frazier, “Abandon Weeping for Weapons.”

close once male jihadists gain new recruits and score a few successes in the war on terrorism. At the same time that a Muslim woman is indispensable to male-dominated terrorist groups and the war effort, she also is expendable. The sudden increase in female bombers over the past year may represent nothing more than a riding wave of al-Qaeda’s success rather than a lasting effort in the global jihad . . . [T]here is no indication that these men would allow the mujahidaat to prevail authority and replace images of the male folk-hero.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, the drive to recruit women as suicide bombers may actually be little more than a tactical response to the need for more manpower. Besides adding women to their numbers, insurgent organizations can shame the men into participating, in the style of right-wing Hindu women who goad men into action by saying, “Don’t be a bunch of eunuchs.”<sup>30</sup> This point is underscored by the bombers themselves. A propaganda slogan in Chechnya reads: “Women’s courage is a disgrace to that of modern men.”<sup>31</sup> And in the martyrdom video Ayat Akras – an eighteen-year-old Palestinian woman who set off a bomb in the Supersol supermarket in Jerusalem – taped before she blew herself up, she stated, “*I am going to fight* [emphasis added] instead of the sleeping Arab armies who are watching Palestinian girls fighting alone” – an apparent jab at Arab

29 Farhana Ali, “Muslim Female Fighters: An Emerging Trend,” *Terrorism Monitor* 3 (21) (November 3, 2005).

30 Amrita Basu, “Hindu Women’s Activism and the Questions it Raises,” in Patricia Jeffrey and Amrita Basu, eds., *Appropriating Gender: Women’s Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 1998).

31 Dimitri Sudakov, “Shamil Besaev Trains Female Suicide Bombers,” *Pravda*, May 15, 2003.

leaders for not being sufficiently proactive or manly.<sup>32</sup>

It appears that insurgent organizations in Iraq are similarly inspired. Although women form a very small number of the bombers in Iraq, the message is that men should not let women do their fighting for them. On March 29, 2003, within weeks of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, two women (one of whom was pregnant) perpetrated suicide attacks against the Coalition forces. Then, on April 4, 2003, Al-Jazeera television played a video of two Iraqi women vowing to commit suicide attacks: "We say to our leader and holy war comrade, the hero commander Saddam Hussein, that you have sisters that you and history will boast about." In a separate video, another woman, identified as Wadad Jamil Jassem, assumed a similar position: "I have devoted myself [to] Jihad for the sake of God and against the American, British, and Israeli infidels and to defend the soil of our precious and dear country."<sup>33</sup>

Terrorist groups may also find women useful as suicide bombers because of the widespread assumption that women are inherently nonviolent. Women can bypass, for example, Israel's restrictive checkpoints and border policy, which has proven fairly effective against Palestinian insurgent organizations inside the occupied territories. Since the mid-1990s, it has been almost impossible for unmarried men under the age of forty to get permits to cross the border into Israel. Women don't arouse suspicion like men and blend in more effectively with Israeli civilians: "Attacks perpetrated by

32 Libby Copeland, "Female Suicide Bombers: The New Factor in Mideast's Deadly Equation," *Washington Post*, April 27, 2002, C1.

33 Cited by Roman Kupchinsky in "'Smart Bombs' with Souls," *Organized Crime and Terrorism Watch* 3 (13) (April 17, 2003).

women have tended to be those where the terrorist planners needed the perpetrator to blend in on the Israeli 'street.' These female terrorists . . . westernize their appearance, adopting modern hairstyles and short skirts."<sup>34</sup> This is reminiscent of the ways in which women in Algeria transformed their appearance to participate in the FLN revolution against the French occupation during the Battle of Algiers in the early 1960s. The use of the least likely suspect is the most likely tactical adaptation for a terrorist group under scrutiny. Terrorist groups have therefore looked further afield for volunteers, to women and children.

A growing number of insurgent organizations are also taking advantage of the fact that suicide bombing, especially when perpetrated by women and young girls, garners a lot of media attention, both in the West and in the Middle East. Attacks by women receive eight times the media coverage as attacks by men, again largely because of the expectation that women are not violent. Realizing this, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades have drawn propaganda mileage from their female bombers.<sup>35</sup> The image of women defying tradition to sacrifice their lives for the Palestinian cause has drawn more attention to the despair of the Palestinian people. "Suicide attacks are done for effect, and the more dramatic the effect, the stronger the message; thus a potential interest on the part of some groups in recruiting women."<sup>36</sup>

34 Yoni Fighel, "Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Female Suicide Bombers," October 6, 2003, [www.ict.org](http://www.ict.org).

35 Scott Atran argues that as a result of Akra's martyrdom, Saudi Arabia sent 100 million dollars to fund the Al-Aqsa Intifada.

36 Claudet, "More Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers Could Be On The Way."

This tactic also makes the terrorists appear more threatening by erasing the imagined barriers between combatants and noncombatants, terrorists and innocent civilians. This is the underlying message conveyed by female bombers: terrorism has moved beyond a fringe phenomenon; insurgents are all around you. For secular militant Palestinian groups at least, Akras's death demonstrated that they are not all religious fanatics who believe that God will grant them entrance to Paradise or reward them with seventy-two virgins (*houris*). Nor are the leaders all gripped by a burning desire to see all females locked behind black veils. For them, the involvement of women is meant to signal that they are waging a political war, not a religious one – and the suicide bombings are a carefully planned and executed part of a precise political strategy.<sup>37</sup>

Degauche's attack raises an added element of female converts, of which there are thousands in Europe, married to Muslim men and willing to make the sacrifice. Increasingly, bombers in Iraq have been female converts to Islam and not Arab women. On June 2, 2006, a woman known only as Sonja B, a German convert to Islam, was seized in Germany, foiling her planned attack in Iraq. After his arrest last November in Morocco with sixteen other militants suspected of terrorist activities, Mohamed Reha, a Moroccan Belgian affiliated with the Moroccan Islamic Combat Group (GICM), claimed, "The partners of several suspected terrorists being detained in Belgium are ready to carry out suicide attacks in Morocco."<sup>38</sup> He continued: "Many Muslim women

37 Usher, "At 18, Bomber Became Martyr and Murderer."

38 AFP report, cited by *De Standaard*.

whose husbands were arrested in Belgium would like to become involved in Jihad, the holy war. [I was asked] to help them by finding someone to train them and supply them with explosives." According to Belgian sources, an Algerian named Khalid Abou Bassir, who claims to be the coordinator for Al Qaeda in Europe, was designated to lead a team of female suicide bombers.<sup>39</sup>

Converts are a particularly dangerous group, not only because they can evade most profiles, but also because they carry European passports. Also, like in most faiths, converts may feel the need to prove themselves and can be more radical in their views than are people born into the faith – thus making them more susceptible to extremist interpretations of Islam. Converts, male as well as female, may very well be a key resource in the future for terrorist organizations. Pascal Cruyppennick was arrested in Belgium for sending suicide bombers to Iraq; other converts, like Richard Reid and Jose Padilla, are also in custody. In Belgium, as in many other countries in Europe, it appears converts are leading the charge to jihad in Iraq.

Are women suicide bombers portents of gender equality in their societies?

Unlikely. Fanaticism and death cults generally do not lead to liberation politics for women. Women may exhibit courage and steely resolve as terrorists, but if they are part of a system that af-

39 The use of women remains a point of contestation among different streams of Salafism in Al Qaeda Central. The recently killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi certainly had no qualms about using women in Iraq or Jordan, but other militants, like Samir Azzouz, have thus far refused. As long as the majority of suicide bombers in Iraq come from the Gulf, the numbers of women will remain low since neither the Saudis nor other more conservative Wahabis will permit women to go on jihad.

fords them unequal status, then feminism doesn't apply.<sup>40</sup> It is telling that the women who participate in suicide bombings are usually among the most socially vulnerable: widows and rape victims. In fact, in several instances, the women were raped or sexually abused not by representatives of the state but by the insurgents themselves. As such they are stigmatized, and thus easily recruited and exploited.

Those who send these women do not really care for women's rights; they are exploiting the personal frustrations . . . of these women for their own political goals, while they continue to limit the role of women in other aspects of life.<sup>41</sup>

The evidence that males in terrorist organizations exercise control over the women is also strong. Palestinian female cadres are not welcomed into the paramilitary terrorist factions, which remain dominated by men. Even in the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, women are not welcomed by the ranks of the male fighters. And in Sri Lanka, where women constitute 30 percent of the suicide attackers and form crucial conventional fighting units, few women are among the top leadership. Beyler remarks:

It is mostly men who govern this infrastructure . . . . Women are rarely involved in the higher echelons of the decision-making process of these groups. Women may volunteer, or . . . be coerced to conduct a murderous strike, but the woman's role is ultimately dictated by the patriarchal hierarchy that rules Palestinian society and its terrorist groups.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Foden, "Death and the Maidens."

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Clara Beyler, "Using Palestinian Women as Bombs," *New York Sun*, November 15, 2006.

In fact, the LTTE has attempted to compel married Tamil women, including retired female cadres, to adopt more traditional and conservative forms of dress (the sari and head coverings) and not wear trousers in LTTE-controlled areas.

However, some may argue that there is a difference between the lower-ranking female operatives in terrorist groups and the women who are planners and leaders, such as Ulrike Meinhof, who provided the intellectual backbone of the Baader-Meinhof organization. The assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881 was also organized by a woman, and many other nineteenth-century revolutionaries were female. Nevertheless, in many cases, women's participation in violence did not lead to their equal status in the societies that formed subsequent to the revolutions. It is interesting to note that the women who played violent roles in revolutionary movements in Iran, Palestine, and Algeria were not included in the leadership of the successor regimes.

The problem lies in the fact that these women, rather than confronting archaic patriarchal notions of women and exploding these myths from within, are actually operating under them. These include a well-scripted set of rules in which women sacrifice themselves; the patriarchal conception of motherhood, for example, is one of self-denial and self-effacement. In a sense, martyrdom is the ultimate and twisted fulfillment of these ideals. So, the spectacle of female suicide bombers doesn't challenge the patriarchy as much as provide evidence of its power. The message female suicide bombers send is that they are more valuable to their societies dead than they ever could have been alive.