

Essay  
**Female Suicide Bombers:  
Clues from Journalists**

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**Abstract:** Journalist reports, mainly from the *New York Times*, are used to identify the motives behind female suicide bombers: post-traumatic stress, feelings of burdensomeness, feeling of hopeless and despair, and a desire to transform their image in their families and communities.

**Keywords:** female suicide bombers, motives, media, journalists

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Friedman (2008) noted that American news media has paid a great deal of attention to female suicide bombers in recent years. Friedman examined a sample of reports from 2002 to 2004 to see how these women were portrayed and found five typical motives: (1) strategic desirability, (2) the influence of men, (3) revenge, (4) desperation, and (5) liberation. Friedman was also interested in how the news reports reinforced or challenged popular beliefs about women and war.

The orientation of Friedman's study was the behavior of the news media and journalists and how their biases influence public opinion. In contrast, the present paper explores what we can learn about female suicide bombers from the reports of journalists. Since suicide bombers, unless captured on the way to their goal, are deceased, they are unavailable for study. As a result, the use of open-source information, such as reports in the media, becomes of great importance (Lee, David & Noji, 2007).

In the case of female suicide bombers, the relative scarcity of female cases makes understanding their motives even more difficult. Psychologists

rarely have the opportunity to interview female suicide bombers, and so the reports from journalists may provide important clues to the psychodynamics of these women. The present paper is based on reports about female suicide bombers downloaded from The New York Times using www.lexisnexis.com and the search term "female suicide bomber" (accessed May 13, 2010). Seventy-six articles were listed and downloaded. These articles were read for information pertaining to the past history and motivations of the females. The majority of articles simply noted that the suicide bomber was female, but a few included details of her life. All of those with relevant information are cited in the case descriptions that follow.

### **RUSSIAN BLACK WIDOWS**

#### ***Dzhanet Abdullayeva***

Dzhanet Abdullayeva, a 17 year-old woman from Dagestan, a predominantly Muslim region of southern Russia, grew up without a father and was raised by her single mother who traded goods at a local market (Levy & Barry, 2010). Teachers remember Dzhanet as a promising student who recited poetry in local competitions. The family moved to larger city after a few years, and Dzhanet met Umalat Magomedov, a 30 year-old militant leader, through the Internet. One source felt that the fatherless Dzhanet had been attracted to a strong (albeit brutal) man who gave her a sense of support. The Russian forces killed Magomedov in a firefight on December 31, 2009, after which Dzhanet made the decision to

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become a suicide bomber. She traveled to Moscow with another female suicide bomber, accompanied by a man. They assembled the bombs in an apartment there, and Dzhanet blew herself up in a subway train. A passenger in the train noted that Dzhanet was not wearing a scarf. "Her eyes were very open, like on drugs, and she rarely blinked, and it was scary... I thought that she might be just mentally ill."

#### **Maryam Sharipova**

The second woman mentioned above was Maryam Sharipova, a 28 year-old teacher married to an extremist leader (Levy, 2010). She had a degree in psychology and worked as a school teacher. She was devout and loved at home, but she had secretly married an insurgent leader, Magomedali Vagabov. When her father asked her if this was true, she denied it.

#### **Satsita Dzhibirhanova, Amanat Nagayeva and Roza Nagayeva**

Satsita (aged 40) and Amanat (aged 26) boarded airplanes and detonated bombs that brought down the planes, while Roza (aged 24) blew herself up outside a Moscow subway (Myers, 2004). All three were divorced, and their husbands had divorced them because they could not bear children, which is a stigma in Chechnya. Amanat and Roza had a brother severely beaten by Russian forces and then arrested three years earlier. He has not been heard from since. The three women lived lives "mired in squalor and devastation." They lived with three other women in a two-bedroom apartment in Grozny, with plastic film for windows and matting and blankets on the floor for beds. They worked in a central market selling clothes and other goods they obtained from Azerbaijan.

#### **Zulikhan Yelikhadzhiyeva**

Zulikhan Yelikhadzhiyeva had studied at a village medical vocational school in Chechnya and interned at the local clinic (Myers, 2003). At the age of 20, she went to Moscow with another woman, and they both blew themselves up at the entrance to a music festival. Zulikhan had no deceased father, husband, brother or son. Five months earlier she had disappeared, and her grandmother said that she had been kidnapped on the orders of her half-brother.

Zulikhan lived with her father, mother and a younger sister and young brother. Her father had a disability pension and had a 21 year-old son from an earlier marriage that ended in divorce. This son was estranged from his father and involved in radical Islam. In November of the previous year, Russian forces had destroyed many houses in the village and arrested some men. Zulikhan's father was arrested and beaten, after which he fled the village with his wife and youngest son, going to a refugee camp in Ingushetia.

Bullough<sup>1</sup> (2010) mentioned two women who blew themselves up at a rock concert. He noted that one of these women had been married to a rebel and had become pregnant. The group leader forced her to have an abortion, and then her husband had been killed in a battle. Left with no child or husband, she decided to kill herself. The other woman had been sent by her husband since the husbands of female suicide bombers earn great praise from their peers. It is not clear which of these descriptions is of Zulikhan.

#### **Zarema Muzhikhoyeva**

One potential bomber, who lost the will to die and surrendered, deliberately botched her attempt to blow herself up at a café in Moscow in July, 2003 (Myers, 2003, 2004). Zarema Muzhikhoyeva (aged 22) said that she had been recruited to terrorism out of shame and debt. Her husband had been murdered in a business dispute in one account and in a car accident in another account. She may have had an infant daughter. On the day of the bombing, she was given orange juice that made her dizzy and disoriented. The information given in article in the New York Times is limited, and this can be illustrated by this case. Bullough (2010) has written a book about the Caucasus region in Russia (see footnote 1), and he profiles one female suicide bomber - Zarema Muzhikhoyeva.

According to Bullough, Zarema was 23 when she was sent to Moscow to blow herself up. Her mother abandoned her when she was ten months old, and her father died while working as a laborer in Siberia, seven years later. She lived with her father's parents. She had a loveless childhood, followed by a loveless marriage (in 1999). The man who kidnapped her from her home, the tradition in Chechnya, was twenty years older than she was. She quickly became pregnant, but two months later her husband was shot, leaving her in his family's home whom she hardly knew. Burdened with this daughter-in-law, her in-laws gave her daughter to one of their other sons, and sent Zarema back to her grandparents, again a common practice in Chechnya.

Zarema visited her daughter from time to time, bringing toys and clothes, but her daughter called her adopted parents "Mommy" and "Daddy," and this broke her heart. She stole some jewelry from her grandmother, and sold it with the plan of buying plane tickets and kidnapping her daughter. She made it to the airport, but she had left a note for her grandmother telling her about the plan, and her aunts stopped her at the airport. She was taken home, and her daughter was sent back to her adoptive parents.

Zarema was beaten by her grandparents, both for the theft and for bringing disgrace to the family. Her aunts told her that they wished she was dead. Eventually they refused even to acknowledge her. Her

<sup>1</sup> Bullough is not a journalist for the *New York Times*, but a Russian-based journalist working for Reuters who has written a book about the Caucasus.

life felt completely worthless. She then volunteered to become a suicide bomber, thinking that to do so would obtain \$1000 for her relatives, a way of paying back the debt from the theft. She was sent on one mission, but her nerve failed her. She lied about the reasons for her failure, but she felt more disgrace. Then she was sent on the mission to Moscow.

## ISRAEL

### *Hanadi Jaradat*

Hanadi, a 27 year-old apprentice lawyer, detonated a bomb in Haifa, killing herself and 19 others (Burns, 2003a, 2003b; Burns & Myre, 2003). She was from the town of Jenin in the West Bank. Her father, aged 50, had a degenerative liver disease. She had seven brothers and sisters. On the day she left her parents, she seemed happy. Four months earlier, Israeli forces had killed the oldest son of the family (Fadi, aged 23) and his cousin.

The father had worked as a house painter in Israel supporting his daughter's legal studies in Jordan. After Israel closed its borders to Palestinian workers, the family lived on the pittances Fadi earned working in the vegetable market. Hanadi was deeply religious, rising before 5 each morning to pray and read the Koran. After her brother's murder, she became more radical. She sometimes awoke at night, screaming from nightmares about Fadi. A week before her death, Hanadi went to the Israeli military to request a permit for her father to go to Haifa for treatment of his liver disease. The Israelis told her to get out and not come back.

### *Wafa Idris*

Wafa, aged 28, blew herself up, killing one man and wounding several others in 2002 (Bennet, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). Wafa was born and lived in the Amara refugee camp north of Jerusalem. Her parents, refugees from Ramia, Israel, had moved there in 1948. Her father had died many years ago. She lived in three rooms with her mother, a brother and his wife, and their five children.

Her husband had divorced her because they had failed to have children. She was a volunteer medic with the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, raised doves and loved children. Her relatives said that she was motivated by seeing many Palestinians wounded and killed by the Israelis. Her brother said that she had an "independent mind," and she had long been an activist, demonstrating against Israel in the first intifada (in the late 1980s). Her relatives thought that she was motivated by nationalist fervor rather than religion. One of her brothers was a Fatah leader and had been imprisoned by the Israelis for ten years and was still wanted by the Israelis. However, no relatives had been killed by Israeli forces, although friends had been seriously injured. Wafa spoke of wishing to be a martyr when she saw pictures of suicide attacks.

Wafa had been married for several years but, after a miscarriage left her unable to have children, her husband wanted to take a second wife. She objected, and so he divorced her. He had two children with his new wife. After he had his first child, Wafa asked him to let her return to him, but he refused saying, if he let her return, his wife would leave him and take the child. Her mother, however, claimed that Wafa had recovered from the miscarriage and the divorce. The mother claimed in public that she was proud of her daughter, but in private wept bitterly, saying, "I lost my daughter."

### *Arien Ahmed*

Arien Ahmed, a 20 year-old student of business administration, was captured before she detonated her bomb after she changed her mind (Bennet, 2002d). Arien was motivated in part by lost love, her fiancé who was a leader of a Bethlehem group affiliated with Al Fatah. She believed that he had been killed by Israeli forces, but the Israeli forces said he had accidentally blown himself up.

Her father died when she was six months old. Her mother remarried when she was six and moved to Jordan, leaving her with relatives. Arien made friends easily and was a good student. At one point, she attended a Lutheran school in Bethlehem and met Israeli students, some of whom became friends. Her family tried to discourage her liaison with the militant. Before she decided on her mission, Arien quarreled bitterly with her aunt and left without a word to her family. When recalling the death of her fiancé, Arien said, "So I lost all my future."

## IRAQ

### *Baida Abdul Karim al-Shammari*

Baida was captured by the Iraqi forces in 2008 (Rubin, 2009). She lived in an isolated community (New Baquba) dominated by extremists and had lost her father and brothers in the war. Like all Muslim women in the region, she had no power over her life – who to marry, how many children to have or whether to go to school beyond primary school. The Islamic influence in her region (Diyala) was strong and brutal, orchestrating mass kidnappings, mass execution, beheadings and ambushes.

Baida told Rubin that she was one of eight children, five of whom had been killed by Iraqi and American troops. Her brothers were mujahideen, making improvised explosive devices (IED), and she helped them. She went to school through 8th grade and had wanted to become an architect, but her mother wanted her to stay home. Her mother died when Baida was 17, and her father married her off a few months later to a man who beat her regularly.

Baida told Rubin that her main motive was revenge – revenge for the death of her father and four of her brothers. She recalled seeing a neighbor killed

by American troops and dying horribly. When her husband beat her, she often went back home for a while, but the deaths of her father and brothers stopped that means for escaping temporarily from her husband. She then went to work with her cousins building IEDs. One introduced her to a suicide bomb cell before dying himself in a suicide attack. The group dynamic led her to volunteer too.

Baida had three children (two boys and a girl, all under the age of eight), but was waiting for release so that she could carry out her mission. She spoke of her own life in the past tense, as she did when talking of her husband whom she hated.

### **Ranya**

Ranya, 15 years old, was captured before her explosive vest could be detonated (Rubin, 2009; Shanker, 2009). She told interrogators that she had been given some juice that made her queasy and dizzy. She was pushed toward the checkpoint. Ranya, like Baida, lived in an isolated community dominated by extremists. She had lost a father and brothers in the war.

Ranya was from an insurgent family, and her aunt recruited women for the cause. Her father, who was probably involved in making bombs, was kidnapped and executed by Shiite militia. Her mother acquiesced in Ranya's marriage to a political figure in the Islamic State of Iraq. Her husband took her to a house where she was given juice to drink and fitted with a bomb vest. However, she was captured before detonating it.

### **Wenza Ali Mutlaq**

Wenza Ali Mutlaq, a woman in her 30s, detonated her bomb on June 22, 2008 (Rubin, 2008). Wenza grew up in Buhriz in southern Diyala, north of Baghdad, in a very traditional tribe which allied itself with Al Qaeda. Her brother and husband became influential emirs. Her husband was killed in June 2007, and her older brother, a potential suicide bomber, had detonated a bomb during a shoot-out with Iraqi government forces on June 10, 2008.

## **Discussion**

What can we learn about the psychodynamics of female suicide bombers from these accounts written by journalists? Kramer (2010) argued that there was no single reason why Chechen women decided to become suicide bombers. They have often suffered a traumatic event such as the death at the hands of Russian forces of a child, husband or family member or a rape. The Russians claim that often the women are drugged. In Iraq, it was claimed that some of the female suicide bombers

had schizophrenia or were mentally retarded, but later reports found that this was untrue.<sup>2</sup>

Lester (2008, 2010; Lester, et al., 2004), using reports from the Internet, suggested several factors that are common in female suicide bombers. First, it seems likely that the women have post-traumatic stress disorder after experiencing severe trauma. In these war zones (Chechnya, Iraq and Palestine), all of the citizens have witnessed brutality and death from childhood on, not only at the hands of the dominant power's military, but also from their own ethnic group. For example, in Chechnya, the kidnapping and rape of women by fellow Chechnyans is common and tolerated by the women's family (Bullough, 2010). In Iraq, the Muslim militias often tortured and executed those fellow Iraqis whom they believed had cooperated with the American military.

Lester also noted the development of feelings of burdensomeness in some female suicide bombers. Divorced or thrown out by their husbands, they become a burden to their families who have to take them in, with little prospect of finding a new husband, especially if part of the reason for the divorce was a failure to bear children. Burdensomeness has been proposed as a common component in the decision to commit suicide in the theory of suicide proposed by Joiner (2005)

The result is that some women in these countries develop feelings of depression, hopelessness and purposelessness in life. Suicide is seen as a way of escape from this psychological pain, and dying as a martyr is not only an escape, but also as a way of transforming their image. In fiction, Lester (2002) illustrated this motive (of transforming one's image) in the case of Antigone (in the play of the same name by Sophocles) who buried her brother against the King's wishes, hoping to be executed (suicide by victim-precipitated homicide) and become as famous as the goddesses in Greek mythology. The act of martyrdom is viewed as making the female suicide bombers heroines in their community.

The limitation of journalists is that they are not conversant with psychology and, in particular, suicidology, and so they do not know the critical issues to explore when they interview those female suicide bombers who were captured or the relatives of those who died. What is impressive, therefore, is that Bennet, in the case of Wafa Idris in Israel, and Bullough, in the case of Zarema Muzhikhoyeva in Chechnya, were able to ferret out the details of the lives of those women that make their choice to become suicide bombers more understandable.

In future research and clinical case studies, it would be of interest to explore differences in the cases in different countries. For example, in the present

<sup>2</sup> One female suicide bomber was thought to have been a psychiatric patient, but this patient was seen at the psychiatric clinic after the suicide bombing, and so the original identification of the suicide bomber was a mistake.

series of cases, in Chechnya, the women seem to have been abused and traumatized more often by their own families and other members of their own ethnic group. In Iraq and Palestine, the women were more often abused and traumatized by the occupying forces (Americans and other alliance troops in Iraq and Israeli forces in Palestine, respectively). The goal of becoming a martyr may be stronger in the Iraq and Palestinian women than in the Chechnyan women. More intensive study of these differences would be valuable.

Finally, the present paper ignores the social and cultural factors that affect these women (and other suicidal terrorists, both male and female). The roles of religion, the brutality of the wars (particularly in Chechnya), media publicity and adulation of previous suicide bombers, and the recruitment and training of suicide bombers are important, but they were ignored in the present paper because the newspaper reports studied did not address these issues. In recent years, several scholarly publications have discussed these factors in great detail (e.g., Ali & Post, 2008; Moghaddam, 2005).

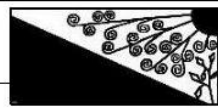
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