

Female suicide bombers – Chechnya

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Abstract

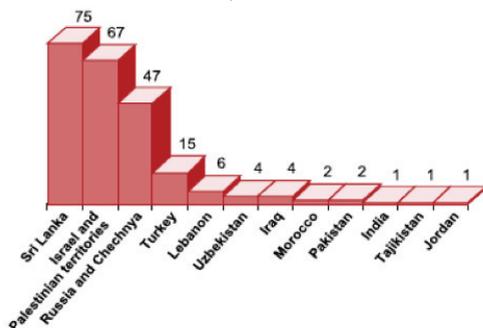
Several leading researchers identified some important factors explaining why terrorist groups use women to conduct suicide attacks and perform critical operations as part of their overall strategy. This can include tactical advantages: increased number of operatives, increased media attention and psychological impact.

The incident in the Dubrovka theater in Moscow in 2002, where forty-one Chechen terrorists, including 19 women, held about 800 people for three days as hostages until Russian forces entered the building, moved the Black Widows into the spotlight as terrorists with the most suicide attacks in Russia.

Keywords: terrorism, security, female suicide bombers, Chechnya, Black Widows.

Introduction

Suicide terrorism is a violent act in which there is willingness to die in order to achieve the ultimate goal of massive deaths, injuries and destruction. Throughout history, women have directly and indirectly participated in extremist activities. In recent years, the number of suicide attacks committed by women has grown considerably. According to a study conducted by Yoram Schweitzer, between 1985 and 2006, female bombers have committed more than 220 suicide attacks, accounting for almost 15% of the total number of such assaults (Santala, 2009). Schweitzer's database also identified the dominant locations of female suicide bombings: Sri Lanka; Israel and the Palestinian Territories; Russia and Chechnya; and Turkey (Schweizer, 2006).



Graphic 1. Female suicide bombers by targeted regions, 1985-2006. (Source: Study by Yoram Schweitzer)

2. Female Suicide Bombers: Myth and Reality

Why women are fighting, or more importantly, why women are turning to such extreme means of violence as suicide attacks has taken on a great deal of interest, especially considering the extremely patriarchal nature of societies from which most of these women come from.

Through centuries and different cultures, women were traditionally glorified mainly because of their ability to give and nurture life, not because of their ability to take life away.

However, critics of this view argue that social constructions of the identities of female victims through daily discourse in the media, politics and social life is largely responsible for the constant creation of gender stereotypes that then create the images of a weak woman, victim and a strong man. In most cases, the media and academia display Chechen women fighters as victims. Even the term "Black Widow", invented by the Russian media, suggests that the main reason or cause behind the struggle of these women is personal tragedy; that women who opt for suicide attacks are mainly widows whose husbands, fathers, and/or brothers were killed.

In the media, coverage of events will be drastically affected by the gender of the attacker. It is estimated that women's attacks will have eight times more coverage by the media than the attacks made by men. The images we see on our screens, or in print, are almost always the same. Women with no choice acting from their personal, private unrest.

Russians represent them as victims of Chechen terrorists, brainwashed, drugged and/or physically abused. On the other hand, the Chechens show them as victims of rape by Russian soldiers, whose husbands were tortured and brutally killed.

3. Advantages of introducing women to suicide bombings

Suicide bombing can be considered a very effective method of a terrorist attack with the potential of causing great harm and massive human sacrifice. As more and more suicide attacks are being carried out, more can be learned about the procedures and resources being used, allowing more difficult obstacles for limiting future attacks. The introduction of women into suicide bombing can help avoid some of these obstacles and provide a number of advantages for terrorist organizations such as:

Strategic Advantages

With young men as key suspects for such attacks, female attackers will attract less suspicion, so they will encounter less challenges in achieving the desired goal. They will often wear non-traditional or pregnancy clothing. In Islamic countries, a certain advantage comes with less body searches in females for fear of violating Islamic laws, according to which they may remain traditionally clothed in the public and should not be searched by male guards (Guy, 2010).

Media Advantages

Media coverage of the attacks is vital to terrorist organizations in order to promote their beliefs and to help recruit new followers. Suicide attacks will receive particularly broad media attention, which, due to their unexpected nature, is higher when

committed by a female attacker (Guy, 2010).

Psychological Advantages

In most cultures and religions the woman is stereotypically regarded as the gentler sex. So an attack made by a woman can have a negative psychological impact on the governments, forces that protect them and their civilians (Guy, 2010).

Increase of Future Recruitments

Greater clarity as a result of women's attacks is seen as a prominent, but convincing, symbolic gesture that signifies that all members of society agree with organizational convictions and thus lead to increased recruitment of new followers (Guy, 2010).

4. Background Information: Chechnya and its society

The culture and lifestyle of the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus are quite different from Russia. Chechen society is traditionally organized around the tribal affiliation (*teipy*) created from the notions of clan and territory. *Teipy* was a closed circle with connected groups of people based on strictly defined patriarchal structures. Marriages within the *teipy* system were forbidden, and in the different tribal marital systems, women's bodies were largely traded for political exchange. Women were actively used for economic and/or political exchanges between different tribes. Later, during the 75 years of Soviet rule, the *teipy* structure of the Chechen society will be disrupted, but tradition as well as Muslim custom law or *adat* will continue to have a significant presence in Chechnya, to this day, especially in rural parts of the country where most of the population lives. The tradition of "stealing" women to become one's wife or polygamy in order to defend the declining demographic situation may serve as another example of the unchanged nature of some of the traditions.

It is important to bear in mind that even during the Soviet rule, women were still exploited, albeit in different ways. Regions with high birth rates were rewarded with more employment opportunities and economic benefits; therefore, women systematically served as a subject of economic gain. However, many believe that it was a Chechen nationalist policy directed against ethnocidal attempts, and in this way, women also offered "countless generations of sons" in the struggle against the Soviet and later Russian authorities.

The above-mentioned social structure of Chechen society and the role of women in this hybrid of tribal, Muslim and Soviet traditions is extremely important in assessing their participation in the Russo-Chechen conflict. More than anything, women are perceived as a subject of political and economic gain, their bodies are a permanent part of exchange in a *teipy* system or to maintain a high birth rate in the Soviet Union. Their place in society was strictly defined and limited to family-related conditions, and was completely excluded from any public participation. Thus, it seems even more surprising that such a patriarchal society as Chechnya has enabled the formation of female suicide bombers, so that women they would leave their ultimate goal - to give life and nurture, and be directly involved in the most possible male activity - war (and suicide bombing) (Kemoklidze, 2009).

5. Case Examples

5.1 Dzhanelt Abdullayeva

Dzhanelt Abdullayeva, a seventeen-year-old woman from Dagestan, a predominantly Muslim region of southern Russia, grew up without her father, and was raised by her single mother who traded goods in the local market. The family moved to a larger town after a few years, and Dzhanelt met Umalat Magomedov, a thirty year old militant leader, via the Internet. One source pleaded that he felt that Dzhanelt, who had been fatherless, was attracted to a strong but brutal man who gave her a sense of support. The Russian forces killed Magomedov in a shooting on December 2009, after which Dzhanelt made the decision to become a suicide bomber. She traveled to Moscow with another woman, both accompanied by a man. Bombs were made in one apartment in Moscow, and Dzhanelt blew herself up on a subway train.

5.2 Satsita Dzhibirhanova, Amanat Nagayeva i Roza Nagayeva

Satsita (40) and Amanat (26) boarded an aircraft and detonated the bombs that caused the plane to crash, while Roza (24) died in front of a Moscow subway station. All three women were divorced because they couldn't have children, which is a stigma in Chechnya. Amanat and Roza had a brother that was beaten by Russian forces and arrested three years earlier. He was never seen again. These three women lived their lives surrounded by misery and destruction. They lived with three other women in a two bedroom apartment in Grozni, with plastic foil instead of windows and blankets on the floor instead of beds (Lester, 2011).

Conclusion

Motivation to engage in war can vary slightly depending on gender, but not fundamentally. Don't men fight more or less for the same reasons? Because they lost loved ones? The problem is that societies will continue to be blinded by traditional gender dichotomies, looking at women as victims and men as defenders. These long-term gender qualities have been strengthened by mass media. In almost every case of female suicide bombers, there is an increasing need to look for some personal stories of these women, which is not always the case when suicide attacks involve men (Khosrokhavar, 2005).

This myth of non-existent females who participate willingly in terrorist acts distorts our understanding of the violence as a whole and the complexities that accompany it; It is believed that at least four women were involved in the tragedy in Beslan, as well as many others who were ready to detonate bombs in the Moscow metro stations, streets or aircrafts, killing dozens or even hundreds.

In the end, we still see political violence as a predominantly male world and we see every female participation in it as an anomaly. Society, media, politicians, the academic community, even some of the feminist literature, all actively participated in creating a "passive" female identity of the victim (Charny, 2007).

The rising trend of female suicide bombers is a strategic problem. Changing this trend will require a comprehensive approach in order to deter groups such as ISIL and Boko Haram from using more women in their attacks. Regardless of how shocked

we are, we can not afford to be surprised by the terrorist attempts to recruit and implement more and more female suicide bombers.

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