The Failure of Female Empowerment Through Suicide Terrorism in Palestine

https://www.e-ir.info/2012/07/11/the-failure-of-female-empowerment-through-suicide-terrorism-in-palestine/

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Equality in Death – Empowerment in Life?

The phenomenon of female suicide terrorism is relatively new. The first attempt to commit such an attack happened in 1985 by a 16-year-old Palestinian girl, who attacked an Israeli military convoy and killed two soldiers.[1] There were many followers of her example during the struggle for Palestine against Israel, but such missions were rare in the following years. However, after 2002, the number of female suicide bombers has grown significantly, as Yasser Arafat called for an intense and active participation of women in the struggle and called them his "army of roses".[2] The behaviour of these women who undertake a suicide mission is clearly unusual in the traditionally patriarchal Palestinian society, and has the allusion of challenging traditional female roles. But is this a real challenge, or does it only reiterate the submissive role?

The literature on female terrorism is diverse with many different topics, hypotheses and focal points. The issue of female suicide bombers is not an exception. There are many branches of this literature, concerning psychological motives, religious and nationalistic influences, societal questions, criminology, the relations between private and public motivations, culture and gender background, just to highlight a few.[3] In this paper I deal with a highly controversial issue, that is, how female suicide terrorism is expected to empower women. There are two main standpoints in this question. According to experts such Barbara Victor[4] or Anat Berko and Edna Erez[5], women who carry out suicide missions are exploited and manipulated by their dispatchers, who use personal grievances and social pressures of systematically gender oppressing, patriarchal societies to make females undertake terrorist attacks. Therefore female suicide terrorism is understood as another means of subjugation and strongly contradicts female empowerment. According to the other standpoint, with supporters like Karla J. Cunningham[6], Miranda Alison[7], Caron Gentry[8] and Jessica West,[9] the situation and the motives of women undertaking suicide missions are much more complex, containing personal and collective motivations such as gender equality and nationalism. This means that they treat female suicide bombers as sovereign beings who take up an active role for a certain motivation and are willing to sacrifice their lives for that. In this debate I share the latter view, and in this research I would like to put special emphasis on the gender empowerment dimension of motivation. I agree with the point that gender equality and empowerment is an important motivating factor in female suicide terrorism. However, I also claim that the aim of reaching gender equality or even of empowering women cannot be reached by this activity.

For analyzing this question, I use the case study of Palestine as one the most typical cases of how a struggle can lead to changes in traditional societies mainly in terms of suicide terrorism. In the first part of my paper I give evidence that female suicide terrorism has certain dimensions that are in connection with gender equality and female empowerment, and I introduce how female suicide terrorists challenge the general stereotypes of women. However, there are many inherent factors in the activity of suicide terrorism that cannot allow them to move this challenge to the front and reach tangible results, as they are silenced through suicide terrorism itself. In the second and third section of my paper I observe this silencing in both the Palestinian traditional Arab society and in the Western society

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perceiving the issue as the manifestation of both the Other and the Other women.

Before I move on to the main part of my paper, I have to clarify why I omit a detailed analysis of the role of Islam in female suicide terrorism in my research. The influence of religious beliefs are usually claimed to play an important role in the situation of women in the Muslim world. Islam is assumed to define the role of women in subjugation, and, in the case of female suicide terrorism, it is also often assumed to frame the whole issue, either through the wish to get rid of religious constraints or through acting in the name of religion. I do not agree with the solely determining role of religion in female (and even male) suicide terrorism, and I assume that religion is only one of the many motivating factors that make women to undertake (or are exploited by their dispatchers to make them overtake) a suicide mission. Therefore, as in my paper I want to put an emphasis on gender questions and the results of the fight towards empowerment, not on the general motivations of female suicide terrorism, the detailed analysis of this religious factor is not relevant for my work. As for religion, as the main structuring force of male-female relations in Muslim societies, I share the common assumption that these societies are more traditionally patriarchal and gendered than western societies, and these traditional divides are supported with religious claims. However, I claim that the key notion here is tradition, not religion, as the religious texts do not explicitly determine all aspects of the male-female roles of these patriarchal societies, so it is the interpretation of the texts through tradition that determines (clearly existing) gender-based subordination of females in Muslim societies.[10]

Challenging traditional gender roles through suicide terrorism

The gendered image of struggle and violence is a kind of "common sense" and almost a commonplace. Men take an active role and fight to protect women, while women passively suffer from being the victims of violence. The stereotypical woman is fragile, vulnerable and needs male protection.[11] Women are perceived to be peaceful and less violent or aggressive than men, and their functions and roles gather around being a wife and mother who nurtures and cares for the family. This passive and domestic image of women is similarly present around the globe in many different regions, going hand in hand with the assumption that women are not appropriate for taking part in violent struggles and wars.[12]

This stereotype is not justified, as many historical and current examples show.[13] Women can and do choose to take part in struggles and fight alongside men. However, with this very activity they challenge the gendered image of struggle and violence; moreover, they also tend to deprive males from one of their most particular masculine features. Women fighters, including female suicide terrorists are active agents of a cause and they are violent, even willing to kill, that is very contradictory with the domestic and nurturing role of women. Moreover, they also challenge the core assumptions of traditional patriarchal societies, according to which women are weak both physically and spiritually, overemotional and not able to determine their own lives.[14] Furthermore, during the fight, women fulfil a very masculine role: they protect the community, the nation, with which they emasculate males depriving them from exclusively male heroism and breaking out from the role of the protected.[15] The willingness of women to die for their community and nation suggests that men are not able to do this anymore.[16]

Female involvement in suicide terrorism carries all these characteristics, with an additional feature. Suicide terrorism is a radical type of irregular warfare, it does not only refer to the asymmetrical nature of the fight, but it also indicates that there is no other alternative than using bodies itself to defend the community. In female suicide terrorism, this feature has an even more important role, especially in a context like the traditionally patriarchal society of Palestine. Such societies render women to secondary positions and prohibit them to challenge male authority. The above-mentioned stereotypes of women are inherent parts of the traditions that structure the Palestinian society and the duties of females, therefore traditionally they cannot take part in struggles and they are expected to preserve their passivity, domesticity and the need for being protected. Only in radically exceptional situations (such as suicide terrorism) can they challenge these roles.[17]

Therefore the asymmetry and alternativeless-ness is much higher in the case of Palestinian female suicide bombers, who decide to use the only accessible weapon against the Israeli occupation, that is, they take the control over their bodies. Being a martyr is perceived to bring many rewards that are basically the same for men and women: religious, nationalistic, economic, social and personal rewards.[18] However, in the situation of a female, the equality of these

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rewards itself means a reward, and a very special one. "We are oriental and women here are very restricted, so this makes a woman's mission special"[19] – argues a female suicide bomber, who survived her mission. Another similar interview excerpts are even more telling about what is in stake on terms of gender in female suicide terrorism: "[Y]ou can take off the veil and wear pants… there is no need to worry about the woman's honour."[20] On the basis of these facts, it is clear that female suicide terrorism means a serious challenge for the traditionally patriarchal Palestinian society. Moreover, I claim that this image is also disturbing from the aspect of Western female stereotypes as well.

In Palestine, there is another gender challenge towards males that is also very important to mention in the context of gender and female suicide terrorism. Colonization and national oppression is for a long time associated with the feminization of occupied men.[21] This is exactly the case in Palestine, where we cannot talk about a sovereign state, where the economic situation keeps worsening and limitations on the freedom of movement seriously damage human rights. Under such circumstances men are deprived from their manly characteristics such as independence, sovereign agency, courage, the ability to provide for or protect women.[22] The adversary relations with Israel, the primary occupier of Palestinian areas, are also transferred to the West that supports Israel. The Orientalist and Islamophobic approach of the West perceives Palestine (and many Arab/Muslim countries) as the Eastern Other, that is powerless, backward, sensual, emotional and not able to determine its life – such as a stereotypical woman. This feeling of "helplessness and inadequacy in the face of the 'powerful' West"[23] contributes to the poor situation of women in the Palestinian society as well, both in conserving their roles in the society as a compensation for manly emasculation and as means for fighting this asymmetrical struggle.

As a consequence, Palestinian women, who decide to undertake suicide terrorist missions, try to challenge two kinds of gendered images: one of their own males in their own society, and one of the West and its emasculating approach towards the Palestinian society, in order to reach empowerment. In the followings I analyze the main outcomes of this fight.

The reactions of the Palestinian society

Because of the practical realities of the struggle, women have played an active role in the Palestinian conflict for a long time. However, until 2002, their main areas of activity were non-violent and political, such as participation on demonstrations and popular committees, or, on the other hand, caring for the victims of violence and supporting their warriors from the background.[24] Female suicide terrorists in Palestine were treated as immodest and anti-religious. However, this perception changed at the beginning of the 21st century, as the intensive struggle, the non-sufficient number of male volunteers and the advantages of using females[25] changed the minds of the patriarchal leaders of the society.[26] Female suicide terrorism experienced a boom, and pictures of female martyrs (*shaheeda*s) became apparent in the Palestinian media. These women are represented here as social heroines and role models, as the ones who bring honour and prestige to their families and societies. There is a great emphasis on their purity, beauty and piety; moreover, even their brilliant minds are praised. Looking at these representations of *shaheeda*s seems to underline the acceptance of the role of the female suicide bomber, even if it is contradictory with traditional female roles.

However, after a closer look, the situation turns the other way round. On one hand, these representations are not about *real* women. This "super-human"[27] images are rather used for silencing the real women who undertake such actions and to cover their challenge towards masculinity. These symbolic perfectly appropriate women represented in the media have nothing to do with the often well-educated, disappointed, alternative- and powerless women who find suicide terrorism the only way to express influence. Although these super-human females can be equal with males in the right of fighting for the community, the nation, these media representations suggest that ordinary women under ordinary circumstances can never reach this status. Moreover, there are many cases illustrating that even female martyrs are not treated equally with male martyrs. Berko and Erez report about would-be *shaheeda*s who did not get the same treatment during their preparation as their male "counterparts."[28] Even if they had managed to become a martyr, their families would have got a considerably lower amount of money than those of males.[29]

Beyond the questions of equality, the social acceptance towards *shaheeda*s is also questionable. There are reported cases of refusing women applying for suicide bombing because of their femaleness[30], and according to interviews

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with would-be bombers, their family would have surely objected their aim if they had known about that.[31] The volunteers who accidentally survived their missions do not get respect from the society – they are considered to be failed both as ordinary women and as *shaheeda*s.[32] All these phenomena underline that the possibility of challenging male roles in fighting for the community, the nation is closed for women. *Shaheeda*s can challenge these roles declaredly only because of the extraordinary circumstances, and only if they die during their missions.

The reaction of the West

As I mentioned before, the West have also had strong reactions to the question of female suicide terrorism, especially because it occurs in general in societies that are perceived as Other in the West, and that are on hostile terms with the West not only for cultural reasons. The case of Palestine perfectly fits into this framework; therefore the reactions to Palestinian female suicide terrorism can be divided into two groups: those that reinforce Western gender stereotypes and those that reinforce the evilness and inferiority of the Palestinian society.

The first Palestinian female suicide bombings attracted far more attention than that of male terrorists in the Western media.[33] "Women who kill or threaten to kill are hot news,"[34] and the reason for that is that this perceived perfectly un-female behaviour carried out by females seriously challenge the embedded stereotypes of Western societies as well. The vehicles for re-enforcing these stereotypes have become activated in this case as well, and the deeds of female suicide bombers became embedded in the familiar madonna/whore[35] dichotomy.

The interpretations of female suicide terrorism are thoroughly sexualized, although many research proved that the motivating rewards for suicide bombers, regardless of being male or female, are almost the same: "they do believe, they are committed, patriotic, and this is combined with religious duty"[36], and, of course, they have similar personal experiences and traumas coming from the circumstances of the constant fight. Nonetheless, Western explanations for female suicide terrorism contain special interpretations and they associate special female characteristics[37] to it.

According to one popular discourse (the madonna), these women, who volunteer for a suicide mission, are naive people who can be easily manipulated[38] or be forcibly recruited under the different pressures of their chauvinistic societies.[39] According to the other popular discourse (the whore), these women are: "beautiful, sexy, smart and deadly."[40] Both representations have one important aim: to render these unrealistic, irrational beings of women to something familiar and culturally intelligible.[41] These representations, similarly to those super-human ones in the Palestinian media, are designed to hide the real women with their real aims that may challenge the stereotypical image of females.

If neither the madonna, nor the whore discourse can be applied, the *shaheeda* becomes something that is not a whole woman. In these cases, the emphasis goes to female shortcomings such as being unmarried, divorced, barren, having an affair, endangering family pride, or having a physical defect that lowers her chances to be a normal woman.[42] Claiming that she is "not a shaheeda but a whore"[43] denies the whole importance of the female suicide bomber, rendering her and her motives non-existing and silent.

All three images are closely tied to emotions and to the sexualisation of the deed. As females are expected to be more emotional, personal stories of family history, social background, love interests and oppression from a patriarchal society are rendered as evidences that these women act irrationally because of their emotional whirls due to the traumatic events of their lives – and not because of patriotic, religious or nationalistic reasons, not because of they decided to move out from passivity and take their destiny to their hands.[44] (Interestingly, biographies always play an important role in interpreting the deeds of *shaheeda*s, while in the case of male martyrs they do not have such an important role.) All in all, the Western discourses which are treating female suicide bombers as naive, manipulated madonnas, dangerous whores, or out-of-society, alternative-less monsters, – willingly or not – silence these (many times well-educated and) opinionated voices in order to reinforce the commonly accepted stereotypes of women.

The influence of a traditional, patriarchal, brute Arab society can be traced in all three representations. From this point of view, the claims of the Western discourse are directed against the Palestinian, or on a greater scale, against

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traditional Arab/Muslim societies, representing them as monstrous societies that produce females of "damaged goods" or of monsters, who live in the "culture of death"[45] and are willing to commit such inhumane deeds as suicide bombings. This discourse, claiming that the terror became embedded to all similar societies,[46] reinforces the perceived "Otherness"[47] and evilness of these societies, and contributes to the further emasculating of Palestinian males and the further subordination of Palestinian females.

Conclusions

On the basis of my research the consequence can be drawn that the seeming equality of Palestinian females and males in suicide terrorism does not mean a real equality in death, let alone in life. *Shaheeda*s, although they clearly mean a challenge for traditional female roles, cannot bring empowerment for Palestinian women, and they fail two times in their struggle for that: once for the empowerment of their gender, and once for the empowerment of their community and nation.

All in all, if we want to find emancipating and empowering elements in the struggle for Palestine, we should turn away from the examination of female suicide terrorism to the direction of much *softer* practices. The presence of women in demonstrations, females being involved in political activities and organizations as new places of empowerment can offer worthy opportunities of investigating into the female challenge towards traditionally male-dominated societies in such cases as the struggle for Palestine. Even the examination of female participation in terrorist organizations (of course, without being a martyr) would lead to a more fruitful research on terms of how the given activity helps to empower women in this especially male-dominated world of war-ridden Palestine. However, the aim to challenge is obviously there – the question is not *if* females will be able to challenge the male domination of traditionally patriarchal societies, but rather when, and through which channels. Suicide terrorism is apparently a dead end.

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[1] Debra D. Zedalis, ''Female Suicide Bombers,'' USAWC Strategy Research Project,*Carlisle Papers in Security Strategy*, US Army War College, 2004, 2.

[2] Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2003), Introduction.

[3] For a detailed literature analysis see: Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, "Female Terrorism: A Review," Terrorism and Political Violence 21, no. 3 (2009): 499-515.

[4] Victor 2003.

[5] Anat Berko and Edna Erez, "Women in Terrorism: A Palestinian Feminist

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[9] Jessica West, "Feminist IR and the Case of the 'Black Widows': Reproducing Gendered Divisions,"*Innovations: A Journal of Politics* 5 (2004): 1–16.

[10] Cf. Patricia Madigan, „Women and Fundamentalism in Islam and Catholicism: Negotiating Modernity in a Globalized World," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20, no. 1. (2009): 1-20.

[11] Dorit Naaman, "Brides of Palestine/Angels of Death: Media, Gender, and Performance in the Case of the Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 4 (2007): 934.

[12] Alison, 448.

[13] Cf. Alison 2004.

[14] Naaman, 935.

[15] Maria C. Holt, "Challenging preconceptions: women and Islamic resistance," in *Europe, the USA and political Islam: strategies for engagement*, ed. Michelle Pace (London: Palgrave, 2010), 80-81.

[16] Holt, 91.

[17] Anat Berko and Edna Erez, "Martyrs or Murderers? Victims or Victimizers? The Voices of Would-Be Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers," in *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility and Organization*, ed. Cindy D Ness (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 148-150.

[18] Zedalis, 11.

[19] Berko-Erez 2008, 157.

[20] Berko-Erez 2008, 155.

[21] Holt, 83.

[22] Naaman, 935.

[23] Holt, 83.

[24] Berko-Erez 2008, 146.

[25] Females are in a better situation in approaching their targets, causing a surprise to the enemy, and their actions gain greater attention all around the world (that is the core aim of terrorism).

[26] Holt, 79. For a critical approach see Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, "Profiling Terror: Gender, Strategic Logic, and Emotion in the Study of Suicide Terrorism," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 37, no. 2 (2008): 181–196.

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[28] Berko-Erez 2008, 159.

[29] Berko-Erez 2008, 161.

[30] Schweitzer, 136; Berko-Erez 2008, 156.

[31] Berko-Erez 2008, 157.

[32] Berko-Erez 2008, 159.

[33] Zedalis, 11.

[34] Zedalis, 11.

[35] Cf. Cristina Masters, "Femina Sacra: The `War on/of Terror', Women and the Feminine," *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 1 (2009): 29-49.

[36] Zedalis, 11.

[37] I do not intend to claim that the following factors do not play a role in certain situations, my aim is to draw attention to the fact that Western media representations of female suicide terrorism are different from those of male suicide terrorism.

[38] Schweitzer, 134; Cf. Victor 2003.

[39] Schweitzer, 132.

[40] Jacques-Taylor, 505.

[41] Jacques-Taylor, 505.

[42] Schweitzer, 133.

[43] Schweitzer, 135.

[44] Cf. Schweitzer 2008.

[45] Holt, 79.

[46] E.g. Berko-Erez 2008 has such allusions, 160.

[47] Cf. Claudia Brunner, "Occidentalism Meets the Female Suicide Bomber: A Critical Reflection on Recent Terrorism Debates; A Review Essay," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 4 (2007): 957-971.

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Date Written: April, 2012