

## Artykuły/Articles

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### **Female suicide bombers and what motivates them**

### **Kobiety-zamachowcy samobójczynie i co je motywuje**

**Abstract:** Suicide attacks are considered to be the most efficient form of terrorism in terms of casualties. Although conventionally suicide attacks are viewed as a masculine form of violence, the number of female suicide bombers has increased over the past few decades. The aim of this article is to try to critically assess the motivations of female suicide bombers by looking into several factors such as religion, nationalism, social inequity, personal reasons. The work is based on the case study of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which presents an ideal opportunity for discussing the phenomenon of female suicide terrorism.

**Keywords:** terrorism, suicide attacks, female suicide bombers, motivation, Palestinian-Israeli conflict

**Abstrakt:** Ataki samobójcze są uważane za najbardziej skuteczną formę terroryzmu pod względem liczby ofiar. Chociaż tradycyjnie ataki samobójcze są uznawane za męską formę przemocy, liczba kobiet-zamachowców samobójczyń wzrosła w ciągu ostatnich kilku dekad. Celem tego artykułu jest próba krytycznej oceny motywacji kobiet-zamachowców samobójczyń poprzez przyjrzenie się kilku czynnikom, takim jak religia, nacjonalizm, nierówność społeczna, powody osobiste. Praca opiera się na studium przypadku konfliktu izraelsko-palestyńskiego, który stanowi idealny przykład do omówienia zjawiska samobójczego terroryzmu kobiet.

**Słowa kluczowe:** terroryzm, ataki samobójcze, kobiety-zamachowcy samobójczynie, motywacja, konflikt palestyńsko-izraelski

## Introduction

Suicide attacks are considered to be the most efficient form of terrorism in terms of casualties. They have become a very popular weapon of choice for today's terrorists. A suicide attack can be described as „a violent, politically motivated action intended consciously and with prior intent - even if thwarted in its final stages - by one or more individuals who kills him/herself in the course of the operation together with his/her chosen target”<sup>1</sup>.

According to Zedalis, suicide bombers are a popular terrorist weapon because they are „low cost, low technology and low risk”<sup>2</sup>. They are „readily available, require little training, leave no trace behind, and strike fear into the general population”<sup>3</sup>. Although conventionally suicide attacks are viewed as a masculine form of violence, the number of female suicide bombers has increased over the past few decades. During 1985 and 2006, for instance, there were more than 220 suicide attacks committed by women around the world, which constituted around 15 percent of the total number of suicide bombers<sup>4</sup>. Yet, as Schweitzer argues, the phenomenon of female terror attacks is not new<sup>5</sup>. According to him, women have taken part in terrorist activities since at least the nineteenth century, and starting from the 1960s their role in terrorism has increased<sup>6</sup>. Some examples are the female participants in the Battle of Algiers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, or the Palestinian hijackings at the end of the 1960s to the mid-1970s. As for suicide bombings, the first female suicide attack was conducted in 1985 by a 17-year-old Sana Mehaydali who successfully targeted an Israeli convoy in South Lebanon killing five soldiers<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Y. Schweitzer (ed.), *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2006, p. 8, [www.gees.org/documentos/ Document-01398.pdf](http://www.gees.org/documentos/Document-01398.pdf), date accessed 09.03.2012.

<sup>2</sup> D. Zedalis, *Female Suicide Bomber*, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA, 2004, p. 5, [www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub408.pdf](http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub408.pdf), date accessed 09.03.2012.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> Y. Schweitzer, *op.cit.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> H. Marway, *Scandalous subwomen and sublime superwomen: exploring portrayals of female suicide bombers' agency*, „Journal of Global Ethics”, 7(3), 2011, p. 223.

The involvement of women by terrorist organisations in suicide attacks is often explained by the fact that it is easier for women to go through checkpoints or pass unsuspected and undetected. What is more, female suicide bombers attract more attention of media and public, which is the desired effect of terrorists, because women are traditionally perceived as the „gentle and naive creators of human life” and their participation in such violent and devastating acts causes repulsion and surprise<sup>8</sup>. Women can also be engaged in terrorism to show „the depth and importance of the conflict, and the strength of the terrorist organizations”<sup>9</sup>. But what drives women into conducting suicide attacks? Who are these women? What is the phenomenon of female terrorism based on?

### **Female suicide terrorism**

Firstly, it is necessary to consider the phenomenon of female suicide terrorism in general and understand why some women are more likely to „abandon their traditionally nonviolent roles to pursue a life or career in terrorism”<sup>10</sup>. One cannot deny that the stereotypical approach to violence has always supported the gender differentiation according to which men are viewed as „habitual perpetrators of violence” whilst women are not supposed to engage in violent activities and are more likely to be „the “vulnerable” victims who suffer under violence with no means of defence”<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, women can be violent and, as literature suggests, throughout history, they have taken an active part in various armed conflicts, wars and revolutions as warriors and fighters around the world, even in societies where their role in the public and political sphere is limited.

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<sup>8</sup> Y. Schweitzer, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> A. Berko, E. Erez, *Women in terrorism: a Palestinian feminist revolution or gender oppression?*, Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies, [www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/html/women\\_terror\\_e.htm](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/women_terror_e.htm), date accessed 09.03.2012.

<sup>10</sup> A. Dalton, V. Asal, *Is it ideology or desperation: why do organizations deploy women in violent terrorist attacks?*, „Studies in Conflict & Terrorism”, 34(10), 2011, p. 802-803.

<sup>11</sup> M. Alvanou, *Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers: The Interplaying Effects of Islam, Nationalism and Honor Culture*, Strategic Research and Policy Center, National Defense College, IDF, Israel, 2007, p. 5, [www.mfa.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/8FDD38B8-60BF-492F-9CA5-5E92D5FC46DD/0/Maria\\_Alvanou\\_Palestinian\\_Women\\_Suicide\\_Bombers.pdf](http://www.mfa.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/8FDD38B8-60BF-492F-9CA5-5E92D5FC46DD/0/Maria_Alvanou_Palestinian_Women_Suicide_Bombers.pdf), date accessed 09.03.2012.

According to Dalton & Asal, women not only joined the armed forces as combatants but also fought together with men in guerrilla wars and revolutionary movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America<sup>12</sup>. One need only refer to the examples of women like Joan of Arc and women during the Russian Revolution.

Thus, it should not be surprising that women have also played their role in terrorism. Although they have often been regarded as „peripheral players” in terrorist organizations where their function is to support men by providing safe houses and collecting intelligence, they have also performed central roles, for example, Shigenobu Fusako, the founder and leader of the Japanese Red Army, and Ulrike Meinhof, a key member of the West German Baader-Meinhof Gang<sup>13</sup>. Also in Sri Lanka women have often been recruited as suicide bombers by the organization called the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) where they have committed around 30-40% of suicide attacks due to their ability to hide explosives pretending to be pregnant<sup>14</sup>. Another example exposed by the media was the case of „Jihad Jane”, an American-born woman who recruited people for terrorist groups on the Internet<sup>15</sup>. There are, of course, other numerous examples in history of cases of female engagement in political violence. Nevertheless, their willingness to participate in this kind of activity is always shocking for most observers. As Knop states, all these women „undermine the idea of what a terrorist is” because for most people terrorism is a „man’s preserve”<sup>16</sup>. It is difficult to believe that women are capable of killing „in such a barbaric and indiscriminate way that targets innocent people”<sup>17</sup>.

Many experts suggest that women’s participation in suicide terrorism can be motivated by a variety of factors. O’Rourke, for instance, points out three possible explanations that can be found in literature on terrorism. According to the first one, female suicide

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<sup>12</sup> A. Dalton, V. Asal, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> K.J. Cunningham, *Cross-regional trends in female terrorism*, „Studies in Conflict & Terrorism”, 26 (3), 2003, pp.171-195.

<sup>14</sup> M. Alvanou, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> A. Dalton, V. Asal, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> K.V. Knop, *The female Jihad: Al Qaeda’s women*, „Studies in Conflict & Terrorism”, 30(5), 2007, p. 398.

<sup>17</sup> K.V. Knop, *op. cit.*

terrorists resent the gender role attributed to women in their society, the second one is connected with psychological reasons, for example, mental illness, whilst the third one is group solidarity, when women kill themselves out of feeling of belonging to a particular terrorist group<sup>18</sup>. O'Rourke argues, however, that the above-mentioned reasons are not always necessarily the case and that there are also other reasons that drive women into suicide terrorism such as death of a family member, rape, infertility, divorce, and marital infidelity<sup>19</sup>. What is more, female suicide attackers are usually older than male terrorists. They are normally in their late twenties and are more likely to be single. The latter fact, according to O'Rourke, can motivate women to commit suicide attacks due to decreasing prospects of getting married, especially in societies where great emphasis is put on family and married life<sup>20</sup>. This fact also finds its confirmation in the rhetoric of some terrorist groups. Male Palestinian suicide attackers, for example, are often promised seventy-two virgins in paradise, while women are guaranteed „a utopian conception of a woman's familial situation"<sup>21</sup>. It should also be noted that, as a rule, female suicide bombers appear in heavily traditionalist and conservative societies, where women do not enjoy equal rights and have a much lower status than their male counterparts do<sup>22</sup>.

### **Palestinian female suicide bombers and their motivation**

Let us look now at the case of Palestinian female suicide bombers to see if their motivations are similar to those described above. As literature suggests, Palestinian women have been involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the early days of the Palestinian resistance. According to Cunningham, already in the 1960s, when the nationalist movements started to „increasingly carry out violent activities”, the participation of Palestinian women

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<sup>18</sup> L.A. O'Rourke, *What's special about female suicide terrorism?*, „Security Studies”, 18(4), 2009, p. 709.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> Y. Schweitzer, *op. cit.*

in terrorist organisations also started to increase<sup>23</sup>. One of the best-known female terrorists, for instance, is Leila Khaled, a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), who hijacked a plane in 1969<sup>24</sup>. Another example of a female terrorist is Etaf Aliyan, a member of Islamic Jihad, who was arrested before an attempt to drive a car full of explosives into a Jerusalem police station in 1987<sup>25</sup>. It should be noted, however, that it was not until the second Palestinian Intifada that women in Palestine started to become a „valuable and precious weapon in the fight against Israel<sup>26</sup>. By the term ‘Intifada’ Palestinians mean „their violent rebellion against continued Israeli occupation of the territories (West Bank and Gaza Strip) that were captured by Israel in the 1967 Israeli Arab war<sup>27</sup>. The year 2002 saw an increased role of Palestinian women in secular and Islamist Palestinian organisations. Arafat’s words addressed to the women (“You are the hope of Palestine. You will liberate your husbands, fathers, and sons from oppression. You will sacrifice the way you, women, have always sacrificed for your family”) initiated a new chapter in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict<sup>28</sup>. Since that time women have been actively involved in the conflict „by joining the ranks of men who use themselves as human bombs and commit acts of suicide bombings<sup>29</sup>. Such women as Wafa Idris, Dareen Abu Aysheh, Ayat al-Akhras, Andaleeb Takafka, Hiba Da’arma and some others were the first female suicide attackers, the so-called ‘shahidas’ or ‘martyrs’, who carried out suicide attacks during the second Al-Aqsa Intifada. It is worth saying a few words about some of these women and their attacks.

In January 2002, Wafa Idris, a 27-year-old woman, a Fatah activist, detonated a bomb in central Jerusalem, killing herself and over a hundred other people including an 81-year-old Israeli, thus

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<sup>23</sup> K. J. Cunningham, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>26</sup> M. Alvanou, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> R. Sela-Shayovitz, *Female suicide bombers: Israeli newspaper reporting and the public construction of social reality*, „Criminal Justice Studies: A Critical Journal of Crime, Law and Society”, 20(3), 2007, p. 198.

<sup>28</sup> M. Alvanou, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> M. Alvanou, *op. cit.*

becoming the first Palestinian suicide attacker<sup>30</sup>. The incident was so shocking at the beginning that many people thought it was a mere accident and that she was simply transporting a bomb which exploded unintentionally. However, the responsibility for this attack was soon claimed by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Shortly after the attack Wafa Idris became a national heroine, a 'martyr' who had given up her life for the benefit of the national movement. Although much has been written about Wafa's ideological motivation, her personal situation could have played its role as well. As Tzoreff describes, Wafa was a young woman divorced by her husband because she could not have children after eight or nine years<sup>31</sup>. She became a burden for her parents and „her chances of building a new life for herself were close to zero” in her traditional, patriarchal society, therefore, the only way of „redeeming herself from the inferior status” was to become a 'shahida'<sup>32</sup>.

The example of Wafa Idris was soon followed by other women. Dareen Abu Aysheh, for instance, a student at Al-Najah University in Nablus, blew herself up at the Israeli Maccabim roadblock in February 2002, wounding four people<sup>33</sup>. She was a member of the Islamic Students Union. She was divorced, and her former husband and her brother had both been killed by Israeli military forces a few months after her divorce, which, according to Tzoreff, might have motivated her to commit the suicide attack<sup>34</sup>. Another young woman to carry out a suicide bombing attack was Ayat al-Akhras who killed herself and two other young people in March 2002. In her farewell video she blamed Arab countries which, according to her, „preferred to watch girls fight instead of becoming active themselves”<sup>35</sup>. Andaleeb Takafka, a 20-year-old student, carried out her attack in April

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> M. Tzoreff, *The Palestinian shahida: national patriotism, Islamic feminism, or social crisis*, [in:] Schweitzer Y.(ed.) , *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2006, p. 20, [www.gees.org/documentos/Document-01398.pdf](http://www.gees.org/documentos/Document-01398.pdf), date accessed 09.03.2012.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> M. Tzoreff, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> C. Brunner, *Female suicide bombers – male suicide bombing? Looking for gender in reporting the suicide bombings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict*, „Global Society”, 19 (1), 2005, p. 33.

2002, killing herself and six other people and wounding more than a hundred. In her farewell video she said that it did not matter if it was a man or a woman who sacrificed himself or herself for the sake of national liberation<sup>36</sup>. One year later, in May 2003, Hiba Da'arma, killed three people and injured 70 at the entrance of a shopping mall in Afula. She was a 20-year-old student of English literature who acted in the name of Islamic Jihad. According to Brunner, this suicide attack presented a „new dimension”<sup>37</sup>. Before it neither Hamas nor Islamic Jihad approved of female suicide bombers for both religious and social reasons. This time, however, these objections seemed to have been overcome.

The above examples are just a few stories about Palestinian female suicide bombers. Nevertheless, they can prove the argument that women's motivations to commit a terrorist suicide attack may vary depending on the person. The existing literature on the topic of women suicide bombers shows that there is a continuing debate in both Western and Arab publications about the aims and motivations of these women. Brunner argues that Western authors tend to look for motives in the biographical details or social circumstances of these young women and the explanations they give range within individual, psychological and sociological categories<sup>38</sup>. Arab publications, however, often represent a different attitude and use a different kind of language, „a kind of poetic storytelling contrasting sharply with the search for rationality” found in Western publications<sup>39</sup>. What is more, many Arab discussions about female martyrs reveal a picture „where community enjoys a distinct priority over the individual”<sup>40</sup>. Yet, certain patterns can be observed in all these debates on female suicide bombers. They are most frequently based on religious, nationalist and feminist trends.

There is a common belief among many people that suicide bombing has always something to do with religious fundamentalism of various religious groups such as Hamas or Islamic Jihad. It is

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> C. Brunner, *op cit*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.



indeed likely that religious notions of self-sacrifice and martyrdom may inspire violent acts because militant organizations can selectively make use of these concepts in order to „construct strategies of action”<sup>41</sup>. In the Palestinian society Islam is an important element in all spheres of life and the Islamist indoctrination has reached a very high level. Therefore, it is easy for terrorist groups „to frame their suicide attacks as a fulfillment of sacred imperatives to fight injustice” where martyrdom demonstrates one’s willingness to sacrifice everything for the sanctification of Allah and Islam, and thus for the fight against Israel<sup>42</sup>. As for the female involvement in suicide attacks, Palestinian women are allowed to take part in such activities and „wage Jihad” against the enemy in order to regain their homeland, and the Hamas charter, for example, contains the view on the gender equality concerning the religious fight<sup>43</sup>.

Some videos and photos of the Palestinian suicide bombers that are usually made before the attack can also serve as evidence proving the connection between the suicide operation and Islam. In these photos, for instance, women are holding the Koran and wearing a hijab (scarf-veil) and a green headband with the words “Allah Akbar” (“God is greater than all other gods”) written on it<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, it is common in Muslim tradition to celebrate the death of the shahid with joy and happiness instead of mourning as if a happy event like a wedding took place, which is in accordance with the Islamic doctrine about martyrdom, Jihad, salvation and afterlife.

The nationalist trend of suicide bombings in the case of Palestinian resistance is closely interrelated with the religious motivations discussed above. According to Brunner, nationalism is part of fundamentalist thinking and in the case of Palestine religious symbols and language are often used by nationalist forces in their fight for liberation<sup>45</sup>. The Palestinian population seems to widely support the acts of martyrdom, which was expressly shown in a survey conducted by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion where more than seventy

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<sup>41</sup> M. Alvanou, *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>43</sup> C. Brunner, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>44</sup> M. Alvanou, *op. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> C. Brunner, *op. cit.*

percent of respondents claimed their support for such attacks<sup>46</sup>. What is more, in their statements, many Palestinian political leaders including the late President Arafat have expressed their approval of attacks against civilians and even praised suicide attackers „without distinguishing between those who die as victims of attacks or while attacking military targets and those who intentionally die in the course of a deliberate attack against civilians”<sup>47</sup>. It should be noted here that some authors consider the nationalist motivation to be more often the reason for suicide bombing than the religious motivation. Brunner, for instance, argues that the four Palestinian female bombers of 2002 were motivated by a nationalist idea rather than a religious one<sup>48</sup>.

Finally, the feminist debate on suicide bombing suggests that by committing suicide attacks women are not only fighting for liberation, but also for their rights in their patriarchal society where their position is inferior in relation to men. According to the Koran, men have power and responsibility over women. Thus, in the Palestinian society women have to follow a strict moral code a deviation from which is absolutely unacceptable. A woman, for example, can only be married to one man and divorce is considered to be a scandal for the whole family of the woman. She has no freedom of movement and it is very difficult for her to get married again after divorce. She has to go back to her original home, thus becoming a burden for her family. A very important issue in the Palestinian society is also the issue of men’s honour which „depends on a man’s ability to control the behaviour of his womenfolk and is inherently linked to the sexual conformity and the sexual shame of women” where the virginity of unmarried women and the chastity of married ones is of primary importance<sup>49</sup>. The lost honour should be recovered immediately by concealing or mitigating in some way, which is not always possible, and the so-called honour killings in Palestine are a frequent option, even in case of rape. Nevertheless, the feminist motivation for suicide bombing is not so obvious. As Brunner puts it, by joining the ranks of male martyrs and sacrificing themselves today, women will

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<sup>46</sup> M. Alvanou, *op. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 47.

<sup>48</sup> C. Brunner, *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> M. Alvanou, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

hardly be granted new rights tomorrow, „especially if these rights contradict their own patriarchal interests”<sup>50</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, the phenomenon of female suicide bombing has nowadays become a shocking reality, especially in the Palestinian society. More and more women are willing to join various terrorist groups and organizations. These organizations are very well aware of the potential utility of women who can penetrate more easily and deeply into their targets than men in order to collect intelligence or conduct violent operations, and they tend to adapt their discourse „catering to the specific individual motives of potential female suicide attackers”<sup>51</sup>. As it has been discussed above, female suicide attackers can be motivated by a variety of reasons in carrying out their attacks. Among the most commonly accepted explanations are the religious, nationalist, and feminist reasons. There can also be other factors such as personal or social circumstances which can influence a woman’s decision to become a suicide attacker. According to Alvanou, in the Palestinian reality „the making of a female suicide bomber is a multileveled and complicated process taking place in the special Palestinian social settings”<sup>52</sup>. Many factors can be contributing and should be considered in combination. However, the factor that seems to be crucial in this combination and is supposed to give „the spark” is probably the religion which is „present everywhere, influencing everything, a mentality, a way to see and interpret facts, a whole way of life”<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> L.A. O’Rourke, *op. cit.*, p. 717.

<sup>52</sup> M. Alvanou, *op. cit.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 82.

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