Women in terrorism: a Palestinian feminist revolution or gender oppression?[1]

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Theoretical approach and background information

The place of women in terrorism and the extensive media coverage received by attacks involving women[4] have been on the agenda of discussions of global terrorism. Throughout history, women have participated in national struggles for independence, in wars and more recently, in terrorist attacks.

Since September 2000, when the insurrection the Palestinians call the "Al-Aqsa *intifada*" broke out, women have played an increasingly active role in various aspects of Palestinian terrorism. The reasons usually given for the inclusion of women in terrorist activities are that they can pass unsuspected and undetected, and they attract a great deal of media attention. The use of women and children in carrying out terrorist attacks is effective and the media

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impact is great, as could be seen when a female suicide bomber did not detonate her device during the mass attacks in Jordan in November 2005. Using women also demonstrates the depth and importance of the conflict, and the strength of the terrorist organizations. There is also the prevalent opinion that the presence of women in the battle arena or in military operations spurs men on to greater action and expression of their manhood (Yizraeli, 1999; Bloom, 2005).

Recently the claim has been made that the increase of the number of women in terrorist activities demonstrates the advancement of women in a given society. It is similar to previous theories which tried to explain the increase in the number of women criminals as being an index of women's liberation and a narrowing of the gap between men and women, including changes in the traditional division of labor between the sexes (Adler, 1975; Simon, 1975). Today as well, the claim is made that the growing participation of women in terrorism in general, and in suicide bombing attacks in particular, is a sign of women's liberation and the attempt to attain a status equal to that of men (Bloom, 2005).

Attention was recently drawn to the rights and status of Arab women in Palestinian society by the strengthening of nationalism and the call to women to take part in the struggle for liberation from the occupation. Palestinian women were invited to participate actively in the public arena in a variety of roles which were defined as nationalist, "as mothers, educators, workers and even fighters..." (Kandiyoti, 1996), and to join "the army of roses which will destroy the Israeli tanks," in the words of Yasser Arafat (Victor, 2003). At the same time, the nationalist movements, including the Palestinian national movement, have a tendency to determine and preserve the boundaries for the behavior and social activities of women in accordance with cultural and religious codes which bind women firmly to traditional roles. Such movements exert pressure on women to express gender interests within boundaries fixed by the conservative national and religious discourse.

Thus on the one hand, the Palestinian national struggle encourages women to express their objections to the occupation and political oppression (even Hamas, which won the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in January 2006, announced that it reserved 20% of its seats for women), but on the other, Palestinian society continues to stress the importance of the place of women in the family and the need to preserve the traditional social construct of femininity. The result is that women have been called upon to fight the forces of occupation, but at the same time are required to accept and obey patriarchal hegemony, a situation of conflicts (Rubenberg, 2001).

The aim of this study was to examine claims of "the Palestinian feminist revolution" as expressed by the inclusion of women in terrorism. It is our contention, as this study shows, that the said inclusion is another type of oppression and a cynical exploitation of women who become victims and tools of male Palestinian society. The results of our research raise many questions related to the validity of the claim that the involvement of women in terrorism is an index of their liberation, and our findings reinforce the claim that including women in terrorism is another aspect of the systematic gender oppression suffered by Palestinian women.

Women, gender and terrorism in Palestinian society

Palestinian community and culture, as in other Arab societies, are based on the principles of collectivity, tribalism and social homogeneity. Palestinian society is not individualistic, and the good of the individual, his welfare and security are assured by the group to which he belongs. Social order in Palestinian society, as in other collective societies, is hierarchical and fixed. The individual is required to obey the orders of whoever is above him on the social ladder, and his place is determined by the age and gender group to which he belongs. Most collective groups are patriarchal, that is, men are higher in the social hierarchy than women and children, who are at the bottom of the ladder. Young women must obey not only older women and men, but younger men as well (Sharabi, 1975; MEMRI, 2005). Disobeying male

authority is a blatant violation of the behavior code and demands punishment (Keidar, 2006).

The family is considered the central unit of economic, social and religious life, and is the individual's source of support in every area. Unity and mutual support are very important in Arab culture. Relatives receive from the family the help and services a modern country provides and is expected to provide for its citizens, such as mutual aid in raising children, protection, financial aid, employment, etc. Relatives are expected to be committed to protecting the family, its unity and good name. That demands that the good of the family be put before the good of the individual, his needs, aspirations, welfare and future (Barakat, 1985).

Collective orientation stresses individual sacrifice for the general good. For a woman, it means putting the good of the family before her own, expressing unreserved loyalty and making sacrifices for the family of her father, for her husband (and his family as well) and her children. The obligation to preserve family honor is enormous in Arab society, especially in matters related to the woman's sexual behavior. If a woman's behavior is immodest she disgraces all her blood relations. Restrictions placed on women also include isolation from the public eye and the narrowing of her life and activity to home and family.

The moral limits of Arab society stress the traditional models of motherhood, femininity and functioning in married life. A woman's identity and worth are measured by her obedience, seclusion, modesty and childbearing, preferably sons (Rubenberg, 2001; Hassan, 1999). When a woman or girl is discovered to have behaved in an unseemly fashion, the family is considered to have failed in educating and supervising her, casting a doubt on the ability of the males of the family to exercise control and demanding they take action to rehabilitate their injured male power.

The socio-cultural background helps explain how women are recruited for terrorist activities, their action and the ensuing results. Joining the cycle of terrorism demands that women leave their homes and the supervision of their fathers (or elder brothers) and associate with men. Leaving the house for a "military action" (which is how terrorist activities were described by those taking part in the study) involves a web of lies and excuses enabling the woman to avoid arousing suspicion. Thus, from the time a woman is recruited through her training and ending with the terrorist attack itself, she hides behind lies and excuses which cut off any return home as far as her parents are concerned, particularly her father, even to ask for help. Such a situation makes her especially vulnerable and exposes her to exploitation by terrorist operatives.

This study will show that a Palestinian woman participating in terrorist activity is not a liberated woman. She is one upon whom social, religious and cultural systems of gender oppression are active and whose inferior position in the social hierarchy is preserved in a no-win situation.

Methodology

For the purposes of this study 13 security prisoners aged 16-26 were interviewed at least twice each over a period of two years. All but one were single. Ten of them were residents of the Palestinian Authority-administered territories and three were Israeli Arabs. All participated willingly. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, Hebrew or English or a combination of the three, depending on which language the interviewees felt comfortable with and the degree of their language ability. They were asked about their lives, childhood, dreams and hopes for the future. As we spoke they opened their hearts and the interviews turned into simple discussions between women, especially after it became clear that the questions were neither threatening nor related to matters of security. In addition, various officials were interviewed, both male and female, chiefly individuals belonging to the Palestinian religious, welfare and educational systems.

The data were processed by qualitative analysis (Glaser, 1992). According to his system, the texts of all the interviews were read and common and unique topics were identified. Identifying common themes enables the researcher to categorize concepts and then rank them according to the frequency of their appearance. That enables the researcher to produce interim findings, in which case every instance which contradicts the finding leads to a newer and more applicable wording of the finding. When new concept categories can no longer be found and the findings do not demand changes, the assumption is that the data have been fully exhausted.

The findings

The role of women in terrorism

In the world of terrorism, as in the society of which it is a part, women usually play a subordinate role. However, while some of them do become suicide bombers or knife-wielding attackers, most of them merely serve the male terrorists in supporting roles. They provide information (including information taken from the Internet), choose well-populated targets to effect the greatest number of victims, conduct observations, accompany males to the site of an attack to detract suspicion, smuggle and hide weapons, provide hiding places for other women, provide temptation, attach explosive belts to the bodies of female suicide bombers, etc.

Usually the women are not career terrorists with long histories of terrorist activities and organization membership, and they are not mobile within the organization. As opposed to men, for a woman involved in Palestinian terrorism, membership in an organization is not significant. She usually does not have a history of broad organizational activity, but rather her affiliation begins close to the attack itself, either shortly before or shortly afterwards. Nevertheless, the terrorist organizations are interested in recruiting women to be able to increase the number of casualties they can claim. The concept

prevalent in Palestinian society is that the more casualties a terrorist organization causes to Israel, the more glorious its reputation and stronger its influence.

The paths leading women to terrorism

The motives for Palestinian women to turn to terrorism, as revealed by the findings of this study, are divided between the desire to revenge the death of a relative or beloved or fiancé and the attempt to solve a personal problem. In the background are religion, culture, society and the national issue. Examples of personal, family or social problems are pre- or extra-marital romantic relationships, forced marriages, financial exploitation (for example, excessive use of a cellular phone borrowed from a woman by a terrorist-operative), the desire to remove suspicion from the woman or a member of her family of collaborating with the enemy, and revenge against a father who refused to pay a dowry, thus preventing his 25 year-old "old maid" daughter from getting married. In addition, the women interviewed expressed the desire for the excitement that comes from forbidden secret meetings with boys, either for training or to accompany them on attacks, and the chance to wear daring clothing on the way to the attack.

There are women who were drawn into terrorism through Internet chat groups with men from the Arab world. Their communications began innocently as male-female exchanges, and the men used romantic manipulation to recruit the women to terrorist activities. Thus, for example, after online communications lasting from 12 to 20 hours a day with terrorist-operatives, women were recruited for suicide bombing attacks or to help wanted terrorists. Among the women interviewed, only one actively took the initiative (although supported by men), and planned and carried out a murder.

According to the data, most of the women involved in terrorism are employed in subordinate functions of camouflage and support. The findings also show that in terrorist attacks carried out by women or with the help of women, there

is almost always another woman in the picture who provides a perfect moral-social cover of visible respectability for the action. The actual planner and string-puller is usually a man who sometimes finds a subcontractor to enlist, recruit and support an attack when women are involved in its operational aspects. For example, a female university student was asked to provide a hiding place in the dorms for a woman who was supposed to carry out a suicide bombing attack; another woman was asked to sit in the car that took a potential female terrorist to training sessions. Sometimes women escort suicide bombers to the site of the attack, and sometimes they bring children with them, so that the suicide bomber will not be seen alone with a strange man in a car, or to allay suspicions.

Profit and loss for women involved in terrorism

Among the women who take part in terrorist activities are those who are interested in solving personal or family problems or in enjoying the financial and social rewards which are the consequence of recognition as fighting against the Israeli occupation. There are those who regard the path of terrorism as a way of erasing their past or a direct route to realizing their expectations, including, among other things, the promise of reaching paradise.

Paradise, they believe, will enable them to divest themselves of the restrictions and limitations placed on women in this world, including sexual relations. That belief is also an incentive for engaging in terrorist activities, because they perceive paradise as something real. One of the prisoners, who was responsible for the murder of a young Jewish boy, said in that context that in paradise she would meet mythological male figures from the Islamic past. Some of the prisoners hinted shyly that "in paradise even women have sexual relations," and could marry heroes from the past, would never be tired, would eat good food and would even be one of the 72 beautiful black-eyed virgins who were the companions of the *shaheeds* (martyrs for the sake of Allah). They also believed that an ugly woman who reached paradise after having carried out a terrorist attack, would become beautiful. They added that they would see Allah, Muhammad and his companions and the shaheeds. In addition, especially if they were shaheeds, in reward for their actions they

would save 70 of their family members from the tortures of the grave before their souls rose to heaven.

It is the nature of terrorist activity to demand association with men, since the terrorist organization operatives, managers, modes of thinking and operative proceedings are all male or male-oriented. Women who become involved in terrorist activity, whether they "volunteer" or are recruited, pass the point of no return because their actions have violated the cultural and moral codes of the norms of family (i.e., paternal) supervision and daughterly behavior. For example, one girl looked for excitement and left the house for training with the *shabab* (boys) although she had no intention of carrying out a terrorist attack, or others wore tight clothing and belly shirts on their way to an attack; all stained the family honor. Such a situation paints them into a corner and makes it necessary for them to invest a tremendous amount of energy in keeping the secret from everyone, including their families (Berko and Erez, 2005).

In addition, a woman who was forced by a terrorist organization to carry out a terrorist attack, even though she only meant to participate in training to satisfy her social needs, could not ask her family for help lest her father discover what she had done. Therefore, leaving to carry out the attack was the only way for her to get out of a dead-end situation. Her parents were unaware that their daughter had been recruited to provide support for a terrorist attack or to carry one out because, as previously mentioned, the very fact of her recruitment was an affront to paternal status, in that the father's daughter was taken from him without his knowledge or permission, and he was no longer able to control her.

The data indicate that the price paid by women involved in terrorism is far greater than the profit they expect to gain. In the first place, despite the rhetoric honoring women who take part in terrorism and the pronouncements of the importance of enlisting women in the armed struggle, in reality it is all

smoke. At the personal, family level, a woman who has turned to terrorism is unacceptable since she failed to fulfill a woman's traditional roles, i.e., keeping house, raising children and taking care of her husband's needs. The question of what led the woman to choose the path of terrorism remains forever open, as one of those interviewed, an Islamic cleric, said, "Such a woman was not properly brought up...Even if people say she is heroic, I wouldn't let my son or brother marry such a woman."

In the second place, Palestinian women involved in terrorism reach a stage at which the loss is built into the act itself. According to the norms of Palestinian Arab society, if a girl leaves the family home without permission, regardless of her age, there is no way back. Even sleeping one night away from home without her parents' knowledge is a stain on her reputation, and the honor of all the members of the family is a function of the daughter's honor. A female security prisoner likened that honor to a terracotta vase, which, "if broken will never be the same, even if all the pieces are glued back together" (Berko, 2004). Women who are caught and sent to jail also suffer the fear of missed motherhood, since even behind bars their biological clocks continue ticking.

In the third place, women who turn to terrorism become especially vulnerable because of the trap they find themselves in from the moment they contact terrorist-operatives, making it easy for the terrorist organizations to exploit them. In certain instances, potential female suicide bombers reported having been sexually exploited before being dispatched, "...because in any case they're going to blow themselves up, so what difference does it make?..." or having had all their money taken by the dispatchers "...because in paradise there is no need for money..."

In addition, the easy access young people have to the Internet allows women to be recruited for terrorist activity through chat groups with Arab men all over the world. Such technology is beyond the ken of the older-generation father, and it enables women to enter a private world over which the father

can place no limitations and in which he cannot supervise his daughter's relations with men, as is customary in Arab society.

The interviews showed that despite the ferocity of their verbal objections to the occupation and their militant activities, the dreams of female terrorists could be summed up as the desire to marry, start a home and have children. Most of them dreamed of having a traditional role-sharing relationship with a husband. One even said, "I want a man with muscles who will be strong and rule me, and not let me rule him..."

The interviews also showed that security prisoners are trapped within a mindset that neutralizes and rationalizes their actions (Sykes and Matza, 1957). The women feel a need to prove themselves, to achieve some kind of recognition, and use feminism and nationalism to justify the actions ex post facto. The process is also nourished by the group energy generated by the other security prisoners.

Summary

Women in Palestinian society are doubly oppressed, suffering from both political and gender oppression. Both play a role in their involvement in terrorism. In effect, two types of women participate in terrorist attacks: those whose motives are political, for example those who oppose the occupation or want to revenge the deaths of relatives, and are forced to channel their activity through the gender construct of Palestinian Arab society. On the other hand, there are those who try to rebel against the repressive gender construct, and use the political conflict as a legitimate, respectable cover for the rebellion, although the division is not absolute and there are women whose motives are mixed.

The study revealed that the gender oppression from which Palestinian women suffer, which includes forced marriage, multiple wives, restrictions on

movement and contacts with members of the opposite sex, and their being considered child-bearing machines, has turned women into rebels, and that rebellion is exploited by the terrorist-operatives who recruit them. The fondest wish of such women is to make themselves more valuable and feel that they belong and contribute to the national effort, and it cannot, in reality, be achieved. The result is that such women, according to the standards of the society in which they live, cannot be both terrorists and "good women."

As opposed to the claim that women who are involved in terrorism are progressive and liberated, the data of this study showed that they are extremely conservative, firmly fixed in place by the norms of a patriarchal society and that their roles as terrorists are secondary and marginal. It would seem that in terrorism as in the Palestinian society which generated it, there is a strict division of roles between the sexes, and that women continue to obey the terrorist men who pull the strings. When the Palestinian woman turns to terrorism the game is lost before it has begun, because the sensation of freedom (especially in contacts with members of the opposite sex) they have by participating in terrorism is temporary, and the relations between the sexes in Palestinian society, of the ruler and ruled, are transposed into the world of terrorism, according to the Arab model of society from which they came.

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