



IDSS COMMENTARIES (67/2005)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

The 'Black Widows' of Iraq

Adam Dolnik*

3 October 2005

ON September 28, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive belt in the border town of Tal Afar, 420 km northwest of Baghdad, killing six people and wounding 35. With the increasing level of violence in Iraq, such an incident would hardly attract a lot of attention, especially given the comparatively small number of casualties. However, in this case there is an alarming new twist – the suicide bomber was a woman. This tactical shift is highly significant, and has the potential of intensifying the Iraqi insurgency.

A historical perspective

Female suicide terrorism is a relatively new phenomenon. Having first emerged in the 1980s during the early wave of suicide terrorism in Lebanon, female suicide operations gained international notoriety only with the 1991 assassination of the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in Tamil Nadu by the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE, which had become the world's leader in terms of the overall number suicide operations, were also the first ones to systematically rely on female martyrs. They have used them in about 40 percent of their attacks. In 1996 the LTTE were joined by the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK), which relied on female operatives in 11 out of its 15 suicide bombings in Turkey, with two more such attacks carried out by the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C).

What is important to note here is that all of these groups were driven by secular ethno-nationalist and leftist ideologies, and were thus not religious in nature. The first country where a female suicide bombing was justified on religious grounds was Russia in June 2000, after the 22-year old Khava Barayeva rammed a truck-bomb into a Russian military facility in Alkhan-Yurt, killing two servicemen. To date at least 13 suicide attacks in Russia have been carried out by the so-called "Black Widows", some of which have in fact been motivated by the desire to avenge the deaths of their husbands. Then in January 2002 the first female suicide bombing reached Israel, with the death of Wafa Idris.

A precedent was set and seven other Palestinian women have followed in Wafa's footsteps. More recently the cult of the "Black Widows" also reached Uzbekistan, where in March 2004, two women detonated their suicide belts in separate attacks. Inclusive of the yet unknown suicide bomber in Iraq, some 120 female bombers have carried out suicide attacks for at least 12 organizations in 7 different countries.

Characteristics of female suicide bombers

Why is female suicide terrorism important? The chief reason is that it possesses several distinct motivational and operational characteristics that fascinate the media and present new tactical challenges for the security forces.

Generally speaking, a woman's motivational route to terrorism is a much longer one than for a man. Women essentially become involved after experiencing a very direct victimization, as opposed to idealistically following abstract ideological or religious themes. This is one of the reasons why they are frequently looked down upon by the male members of the group. This is especially so in Islamist organizations, where additional dilemmas associated with the fundamentalist interpretation of the Quran play a role, such as the restrictions preventing women from operating freely outside of their homes without being accompanied by a male relative. Further, there has been a considerable stigma regarding the reliability and determination of women because of their perceived softness due to motherly instincts.

However, women terrorists in general actually tend to be more ruthless precisely because of these instincts; once they decide that their violent actions will benefit their children and future generations, they typically do not hesitate to do what they feel is necessary for the success of the operation. Further, as experience tells us from the involvement of female operatives in left-wing and ethno-nationalist organizations, the desire to prove that they are just as worthy to the organization as men has worked to strengthen their sacrificial resolve even more. In short, females make more committed and more reliable suicide bombers than men.

Why do groups use female suicide bombers?

There are a number of reasons why female suicide bombers are an attractive proposition for terrorist organizations. First, there are tactical advantages associated with the disruption of an established profile used by security and law enforcement agencies. There is for example the possibility of concealing the explosive device in a fake belly utilising women's ability to appear pregnant. Such tactical advantages were also exploited in the Tal Afar suicide bombing in which the woman involved slipped into the town through checkpoints where females were not searched. Having reached the target location, the woman attacker then dressed herself as a male so she could blend easily into the crowd of males in front of the Iraqi army recruiting centre. She then set off the explosives strapped to her body underneath her clothing.

A possibly even more important reason behind the use of female suicide bombers is the message such operations convey. The first target audience is the international community, which can be shocked by the images of desperation and commitment to sacrifice. As people around the world try fruitlessly to comprehend the motivations of a woman to commit such an act, they are left wondering about the enormous dedication and hatred demonstrated by the bomber. The group can then gain the image of committed believers who will do anything to reach their goals, implying that the present environment is so humiliating that death is preferable to life under such conditions.

Another especially strong message of female suicide terrorism is sent to followers and supporters, triggering a guilt-trip among men that they are not doing enough to fight the enemy, and strengthening the pressure to do more. For instance, in the video recorded right before her death, the first Chechen suicide bomber Khava Barayeva pleaded to Chechen men to "not take the women's role by staying at home". Palestinian suicide bombers have also made similar statements in the 'last will' videos. Not surprisingly, in both cases the end result

was the increased flow of outside donations for the respective campaign.

Future outlook

Experience shows that suicide terrorism in general, and female suicide terrorism in particular, is very much a copycat phenomenon, with large campaigns usually following a single precedent. Given the recent emergence of such a precedent in Iraq, we are likely to witness more such attacks in the country during the upcoming months. This will naturally present new challenges for the counter-insurgency effort.

Firstly, the coalition forces will now have to adapt to the new reality of women posing a direct threat by improving security arrangements. These are likely to involve unpopular measures such as more intrusive body searches of women. Such measures will become problematic as they are likely to be seen as a violation of cultural and ethical norms, possibly adding fuel to the anti-American sentiment. In addition, it would not be surprising to see the deliberate dissemination of a myth about the Tal Afar perpetrator's alleged rape or torture by the Americans in order to intensify this sentiment even more. This of course presents a new challenge in the counter-propaganda department.

Secondly, the use of a woman to "do a man's job" will send a powerful message of guilt to radical Muslims around the world by implying that they have not done enough for the defence of the Muslim *Ummah*. This is likely to result in the increased flow of funding and foreign militants into the country. The overall end result of the recent suicide bombing in Tal Afar is thus likely to be a further intensification of the insurgency campaign.

* Adam Dolnik is a researcher at the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University