

**Mother.
Daughter.
Sister.
Bomber.**

WOMEN ARE INCREASINGLY TAKING A LEADING ROLE IN CONFLICTS

BY BECOMING TERRORISTS—SPECIFICALLY,

BY MIA BLOOM

THE WOMAN KNOWN AS DHANU stood waiting for former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. It was May 21, 1991. She wore thick glasses that obscured her face and clutched a sandalwood garland; the bulge beneath her orange *salwar kameez* (a traditional Hindu dress) bespoke her apparent pregnancy. As Gandhi strode toward the podium at the political rally where he was to speak, he acknowledged well-wishers lined along the red carpet. He clasped Dhanu's hand, and she respectfully kneeled before him. With her right hand she activated an explosive device strapped to her belly with a denim belt and embedded with 10,000 steel pellets. Gandhi, his assassin, and 16 others were killed.

Later it was revealed that a policewoman had attempted to prevent Dhanu—an assassin allegedly dispatched by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—from reaching the prime minister. But Gandhi had intervened, saying something like, “Relax, baby”—quite possibly the last words he ever spoke.¹

Gandhi may have been blinded by gender, but if so, he was not the first, nor the last. Even the security-conscious United States, post-9/11, failed to include women among an official profile of potential terrorists developed by the Department of Homeland Security to scrutinize visa seekers.² Traditionally,

BY BECOMING SUICIDE BOMBERS.

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women have been perceived as victims of violence rather than as perpetrators. Yet they are now taking a leading role in conflicts by becoming terrorists and, specifically, suicide bombers—using their bodies as human detonators.

The female suicide bomber is a phenomenon that predates the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. The Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP), a secular, pro-Syrian, Lebanese organization, sent the first such bomber, a 17-year-old Lebanese girl named Sana'a Mehaydali, to blow herself up near an Israeli convoy in Lebanon in 1985. Out of 12 suicide attacks conducted by the SSNP, women took part in five of them. After Lebanon in the 1980s, female bombers spread to other parts of the globe, including Sri Lanka, Turkey, Chechnya, and Israel. Worldwide, approximately 17 groups have started using the tactical innovation of suicide bombing, with women operatives accounting for 15 percent of those attacks.³ According to terror expert Rohan Gunaratna, almost 30

THE RECRUITMENT OF WOMEN BY INSURGENT



MOBILIZE GREATER NUMBERS

percent of suicide attackers are women.⁴ Most have belonged to secular separatist organizations, such as LTTE and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). But recent years have witnessed the worrisome emergence

of women suicide bombers in religious organizations.

Historically, to the extent that women have been involved in conflict, they have served supporting roles. Their primary contribution to war has been to give birth to fighters and raise them in a revolutionary environment. The advent of women suicide bombers has not so much annulled that identity as it has transformed it. Even as martyrs, they may be portrayed as the chaste wives and mothers of revolution. When Wafa Idris became the first female Palestinian suicide bomber to strike Israel in January 2002, an Egyptian newspaper eulogized: "The bride of Heaven preferred death to the pleasures of life, so as to convey a powerful message to

SIPA/HEIDI LEVINE (TOP); KRT; PREVIOUS PAGE: REUTERS

Role models: 10-year-old Suwar Abu Salem (left) wears a necklace with a portrait of her sister Zainab, who blew herself up at a hitchhiking post in Jerusalem on September 22, 2004; suicide bombers Hanadi Jaradat (p. 55), Reem Riashi with her children (below), and Wafa Idris (lower left).



would not be frisked or subjected to intense scrutiny. Israel learned this lesson as well. Hanadi Jaradat, a law student from Jenin who killed 19 civilians in a crowded Haifa restaurant in 2003, wore an explosive belt around her waist in order to feign pregnancy.

Moreover, according to a British security source, “The terrorists know there are sensitivities about making intimate body searches of women, particularly Muslim women, and thus you can see why some groups might be planning to use a female suicide bomber. Hiding explosives in an intimate part of the body means even less chance of detection.”⁷ The report said a woman could conceal up to 12 pounds of plastic explosives inside her body. The detonator and other components, which can be hidden in a watch, cell phone, or electrical device, could easily be taken past security checkpoints.

The use of the least-likely suspect is the most-likely tactical adaptation for a terrorist group under scrutiny. A growing number of insurgent organizations have adopted suicide bombing not only because of its tactical superi-

to fight instead of the sleeping Arab armies who are watching Palestinian girls fighting alone,” in an apparent dig at Arab leaders for not being sufficiently proactive or aggressive against the Israeli enemy.¹⁰

But why do these women become suicide bombers? The defining characteristics of a suicide bomber, in general, are elusive. Contrary to popular perception, they are not unbalanced sociopaths prone to self-destructive tendencies. Nor are they poor, uneducated religious fanatics. “The profile of a suicide terrorist resembles that of a politically conscious individual who might join a grassroots movement more than it does the stereotypical murderer, religious cult member, or everyday suicide,” notes Robert Pape of the University of Chicago.¹¹

Additionally, they may feel a sense of alienation from their surrounding societies, or be seeking retribution for humiliation. (Eyad El-Sarraj, the founder and director of the Gaza Community Mental Health Program, has found that Palestinian suicide bombers share childhood traumas—notably, the humiliation of their fathers by Israeli soldiers.)¹² Suicide bombers tend to emerge in societies that extol the virtues of self-sacrifice.

And, crucially, suicide bombers rarely act on their own. They are recruited and indoctrinated by organizations that might exploit their desire for a sense of belonging and that may act as surrogate families.

These same characteristics apply to women suicide bombers—albeit through the unique prism of their experiences and status. In Sri Lanka, Mangalika Silva, the coordinator of Women for Peace in Colombo, observes that, “The self-sacrifice of the female bombers is almost an extension of the idea of motherhood in the Tamil culture. In this strongly patriarchal society, Tamil mothers make great sacrifices for their sons on a daily basis; feeding them before themselves or the girl children, serving on

ORGANIZATIONS CAN

OF OPERATIVES BY SHAMING MEN INTO PARTICIPATING.

the Arab nation.”⁵ Another editorial noted, “From Mary’s womb issued a Child who eliminated oppression, while the body of Wafa became shrapnel that eliminated despair and aroused hope.”⁶

To complicate the notions of femininity and motherhood, the female bomber’s improvised explosive device (IED) is often disguised under her clothing to make it appear as if she is pregnant and thus beyond suspicion or reproach. Police reports in Turkey have emphasized caution approaching Kurdish women who may appear pregnant; several female PKK fighters disguised themselves this way in order to penetrate crowds of people more effectively and to avoid detection, assuming correctly that they

ority to traditional guerrilla warfare, but also because suicide bombing, especially when perpetrated by women and girls, garners significant media attention both domestically and abroad.

The recruitment of women by insurgent organizations can mobilize greater numbers of operatives by shaming men into participating. This tactic has parallels to right-wing Hindu women who goad men into action through speeches saying, “Don’t be a bunch of eunuchs.”⁸ This point is underscored by the bombers themselves. A propaganda slogan in Chechnya reads: “Women’s courage is a disgrace to that of modern men.”⁹ Before Ayat Akras blew herself up in Israel in April 2002, she taped her martyrdom video and stated, “I am going

them and so on.”¹³ Anecdotal evidence suggests that many women bombers have been raped or sexually abused either by representatives of the state or by insurgents—thereby contributing to a sense of humiliation and powerlessness, made only worse by stigmatization within their own societies. They may be avenging the loss of a family member or seeking to redeem the family name. And these women, not content to play the designated roles of passive observer or supportive nurturer, may seek to prove to their own societies that they are no less capable than their male counterparts to be vital contributors to the cause. Clara Beyer, a researcher for the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Israel, astutely observes that, “When women become human bombs, their intent is to make a statement not only in the name of a country, a religion, a leader, but also in the name of their gender.”¹⁴

DAUGHTERS OF REVOLUTION

Insurgent and terrorist organizations have long provided women a potential avenue for advancement beyond what their traditional societies could offer. Women in radical secular organizations have engaged in anticolonial and revolutionary struggles in the developing world and elsewhere since the 1960s. They have played vital support roles in the Algerian revolution (1958–1962), the Iranian Revolution (1979), the war in Lebanon (1982), the first Palestinian Intifada (1987–1991), and the Al Aqsa Intifada (since 2000).¹⁵

Female terrorists have come from all parts of the globe: Italy’s Red Brigades, Germany’s Baader-Meinhof faction, America’s Black Panthers, and the Japanese Red Army—occasionally emerging as leaders. Women have even been on the front lines of combat, demonstrating that their revolutionary and military zeal is no less than that of men. (The Tamil Tigers

have units exclusively for women.) There also have been a handful of notorious Palestinian women militants. In 1970, Leila Khaled was caught after attempting to hijack an El Al flight to London. Khaled, as journalist Eileen Macdonald puts it, “shattered a million and one taboos overnight and she revolutionized the thinking of hundreds of other angry young women around the world.”¹⁶

Khaled explained her rationale: “Violence was a way of leveling the patriarchal society through revolutionary zeal—the women would demonstrate that their commitment was no less than those of their brothers, sons, or husbands. Strategically, women are able to gain access to areas where men had greater difficulty

throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This militant involvement by women has had an extreme effect on the existing norms of Palestinian society, which has long had a cultural set of rules that describe and limit gender roles. These norms have dictated the separation of the sexes and prescribed that women restrict themselves to the private space of the home.

Through violence, however, women have placed themselves on the front lines, in public, alongside men to whom they are not related. This results in a double trajectory for militant women—convincing society of their valid contributions while at the same time reconstructing the normative ideals of their society.¹⁸ “Palestinian

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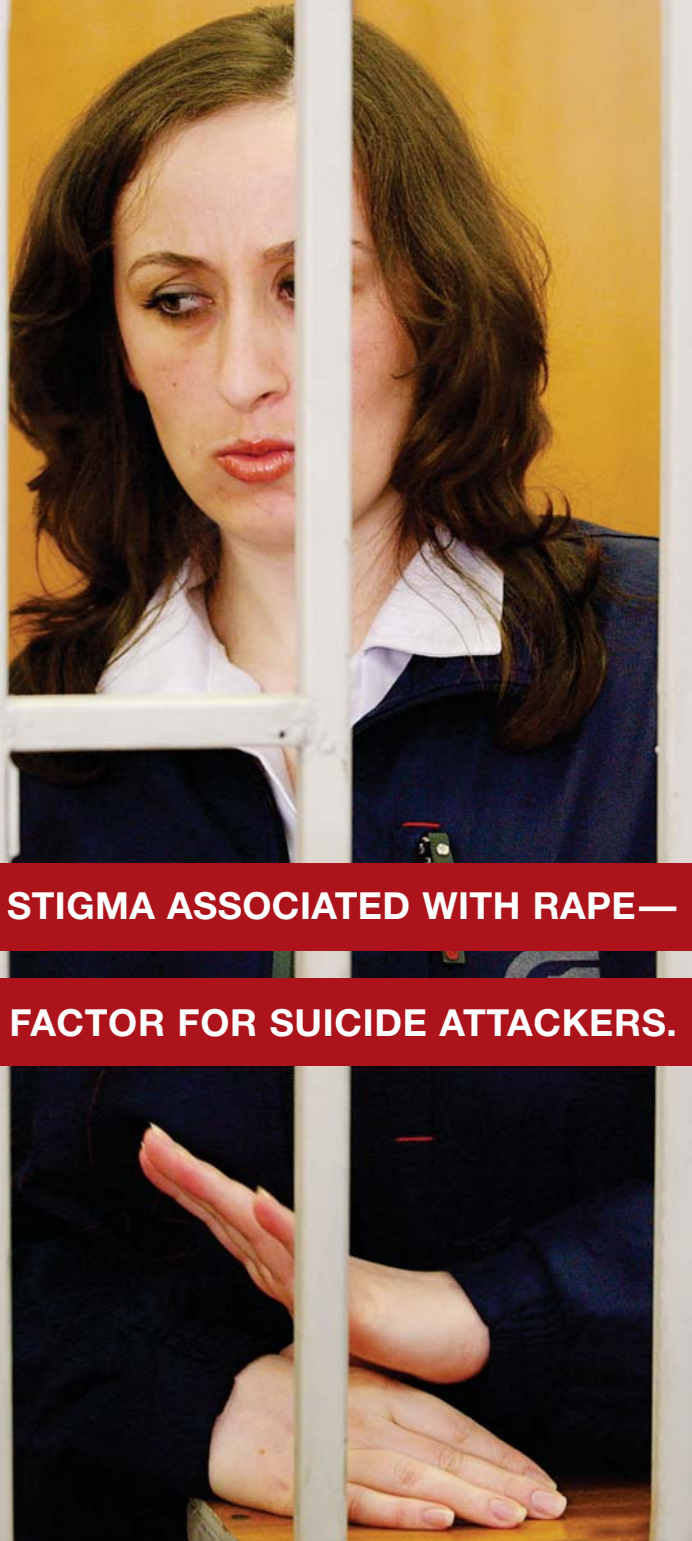


because the other side assumed that the women were second-class citizens in their own society—dumb, illiterate perhaps, and incapable of planning an operation.”¹⁷

More recently, the idea of violence empowering women has spread

women have torn the gender classification out of their birth certificates, declaring that sacrifice for the Palestinian homeland would not be for men alone,” declared female columnist Samiya Sa’ad Al Din in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Akhbar*. “On the

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STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH RAPE—

FACTOR FOR SUICIDE ATTACKERS.

Under arrest: Zara Murtazaliyeva, who is accused of planning suicide attacks in Moscow (left). Attempted suicide bomber Kahira Saadi in an Israeli prison (opposite page).

one mother of two who left relatives stricken and shocked.²⁰ Some analysts have suggested a shared characteristic among them, that they were misfits or outcasts— young women who found themselves, for various reasons, “in acute emotional distress due to social stigmatization.”²¹ Journalist Barbara Victor corroborated this hypothesis when she determined that the first four female Palestinian suicide bombers were in situations where the act of martyrdom was seen as their sole chance to reclaim the “family honor” that had been lost by their own actions or

the actions of other family members.²² Allegations abound that the first female Hamas suicide bomber, Reem Riashi, a mother of two, was coerced by both her husband and lover as a way of saving face after an extramarital affair.²³

Elsewhere in the world, sexual violence against women—and the ensuing social stigma associated with rape in patriarchal societies—appears to be a common motivating factor for sui-

cide attackers. Kurdish women allegedly raped in Turkey by the military have joined the PKK, while Tamil women allegedly raped by the Sinhalese security services and military join the LTTE. Gandhi’s assassin, Dhanu, is alleged to have been raped, although this issue remains one of intense debate and controversy. (By some accounts, it was her mother who was raped by Indian peacekeepers who occupied Sri Lanka from 1987 to 1990). According to the Hindu faith, once a woman is sexually violated she cannot get married or have children. Fighting for Tamil freedom might have been seen as the only way for such a woman to redeem herself.

For Dhanu, the conflict had another personal dimension: The peacekeepers in Sri Lanka had killed her brother, a well-known cadre for the Tamil Tigers. In that regard, she shared an experience common in conflict-ridden societies—the loss of loved ones. Most of the Chechen attacks against Russia in 2004 involved “Black Widows” reportedly wishing to avenge the deaths of family members in Russia’s conflict in Chechnya.

Female bombers have participated in more than 18 major attacks since the outbreak of the second Chechen War in 1999 and have developed into an increasingly serious threat since 2000. Previous acts of violence took place in the Northern Caucasus and were primarily aimed at military targets. They did not aim to kill large numbers of Russian civilians. The attacks by female suicide bombers have reversed these patterns. Imran Yezhiyev, of the Chechen-Russian Friendship Society in Ingushetia, observes: “Suicide attacks were an inevitable response to the ‘most crude, the most terrible’ crimes Russian forces had committed against Chechen civilians during the war. When Russian soldiers kill children and civilians and demand payment for their return, many in Chechnya are outraged and vow revenge. One woman, Elvira, whose 15-year-old son had been killed by Russian troops who demanded \$500 to

contrary, all Palestinian women will write the history of the liberation with their blood, and will become time bombs in the face of the Israeli enemy. They will not settle for being mothers of martyrs.”¹⁹

The first wave of Palestinian women who became *shahidas* (female martyrs) had varied backgrounds: one ambulance worker, one seamstress, two in college, one in high school, one law school graduate, and

return his corpse stated, ‘Oh, yes, I want to kill them. Kill Russians, kill their children. I want them to know what it is like.’”²⁴

DIVINE INTERVENTION

Islamic leaders initially opposed women’s activism and banned women from becoming suicide bombers on their behalf; only a handful of clerics endorsed such operations. The Saudi High Islamic Council gave the go-ahead to women suicide bombers in August 2001, after a 23-year-old Palestinian mother of two was seized by Israeli security as she brought explosives to Tel Aviv’s central bus station. Religious leaders in Palestine disagreed, and a theological debate rages as to whether women should or could be martyrs.²⁵

Hamas’s former spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, argued that a woman’s appropriate role in the conflict was to support the fighters (that is, the men). According to Yassin, “In our Palestinian society, there is a flow of women toward jihad and martyrdom, exactly like the young men. But the woman has uniqueness. Islam sets some restrictions for her, and if she goes out to wage jihad and fight, she must be accompanied by a male chaperon.” Sheikh Yassin further rationalized his reservations—not because of *Shariah* (Islamic religious law), but because women martyrs were deemed unnecessary: “At the present stage, we do not need women to bear this burden of jihad and martyrdom. The Islamic Movement cannot accept all the Palestinian males demanding to participate in jihad and in martyrdom operations, because they are so numerous. Our means are limited, and we cannot absorb all those who desire to confront the enemy.”²⁶

This situation is alarmingly true. Most of the militant organizations in Palestine cannot fill positions for martyrdom operations fast enough.²⁷ After Wafa Idris blew herself up in downtown Jerusalem in January 2002, Yassin categorically renounced the use

of women as suicide bombers or assailants. Yet, sensing the increasing support for women martyrs and bowing to public pressure and demands, Yassin amended his position, saying that a woman waging jihad must be accompanied by a male chaperon “if she is to be gone for a day and a night. If her absence is shorter, she does not need a chaperon.” In a second statement, Yassin granted a woman’s right to launch a suicide attack alone only if it does not take her more than 24 hours to be away from home—an ironic position, since she would be gone for longer if she succeeded in her mission.²⁸

While Yassin pointed out that it was Hamas’s armed wing that decided

a new development in our fight against the enemy. The holy war is an imperative for all Muslim men and women, and this operation proves that the armed resistance will continue until the enemy is driven from our land. This is revenge for all the fatalities sustained by the armed resistance.”²⁹

Among Islamic groups, the trend toward women suicide bombers appears

Face-off: A policeman shows a portrait of a suspected suicide bomber near the Rizhskaya subway station in Moscow (below); Kurdish fighters gather around a portrait of “Zilan,” who died in a suicide attack (right).



where and when attacks would take place, his comments included quotes from the videotape that Riashi, Hamas’s first female bomber, recorded before carrying out her January 2004 attack, about how she hoped her “organs would be scattered in the air and her soul would reach paradise.” Yassin added: “The fact that a woman took part for the first time in a Hamas operation marks a significant evolution. . . . The male fighters face many obstacles on their way to operations, and this is

to be contagious, as religious authorities are making exceptions and finding legal precedent to permit women’s participation. Groups affiliated with Al Qaeda have begun to employ women bombers. An indication of this ideological shift was the capture of two young women in Rabat, Morocco, on their way to target a liquor store in a pre-empted suicide attack. Within weeks of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, on March 29, 2003, two women (one of whom was pregnant) perpetrated suicide attacks



TO KILL THEM. KILL RUSSIANS,

KILL THEIR CHILDREN. I WANT THEM TO KNOW WHAT IT IS LIKE.”

against Coalition forces. Al Jazeera television reported on April 4 that the two Iraqi women had videotaped their intentions: “We say to our leader and holy war comrade, the hero commander Saddam Hussein, that you have sisters that you and history will boast about.”³⁰

Also in March 2003, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* published an interview with a woman calling herself “Um Osama,” the alleged leader of the women Mujahideen of Al Qaeda. The Al Qaeda cell claimed to have set up squads of female suicide bombers under orders from Osama bin Laden to target the United States. The women bombers purportedly include Afghans, Arabs, Chechens, and other nationalities. “We are preparing for the new strike announced by our leaders, and I declare that it will make America forget . . . the September 11 attacks,” she

said. “The idea came from the success of martyr operations carried out by young Palestinian women in the occupied territories. Our organization is open to all Muslim women wanting to serve the [Islamic] nation . . . particularly in this very critical phase.”³¹

Yet another measure of Al Qaeda’s growing interest in recruiting women was the publication in August 2004 of the online magazine *Al Khansaa*. Published by the group’s self-described Arabian Peninsula Women’s Information Bureau, the magazine’s first issue calls upon women to participate in jihad in a variety of ways. Reflecting the evolving duality of women’s proscribed role in armed struggle, the magazine emphasized first and foremost that the “woman in the family is a mother, wife, sister, and daughter. In society she is an educator, propaga-

tor, and preacher of Islam, and a female jihad warrior. Just as she defends her family from any possible aggression, she defends society from destructive thoughts and from ideological and moral deterioration, and she is the soldier who bears [the man’s] pack and weapon on his back in preparation for the military offensive.” However, the article added, “When jihad becomes a personal obligation, then the woman is summoned like a man, and need ask permission neither from her husband nor from her guardian, because she is obligated, and none need to ask permission in order to carry out a commandment that everyone must carry out.”³²

Indeed, some see female suicide bombers as a crucial blow against the decadent influences of Western culture—an act of defiance that does not redefine women’s traditional roles,

but reaffirms them. A columnist in the Jordanian newspaper *Al-Dustour* noted, "The Arab woman has taken her place and her dignity. It is the women's rights activists in the West who robbed women of their right to be human, and viewed them as bodies without souls. . . . Wafa [Idris] did not carry makeup in her suitcase, but enough explosives to fill the enemies with horror. . . . Wasn't it the West that kept demanding that the Eastern woman become equal to the man? Well, this is how we understand equality—this is how the martyr Wafa understood equality."³³

Yet, the women who seek empowerment and equality by turning themselves into human bombs merely reinforce the inequalities of their societies, rather than confront them and explode the myths from within. Traditional societies have a well-scripted set of rules in which women sacrifice themselves—the ideal of motherhood, in particular, is one of self-denial and self-effacement. The women who choose the role of martyrs do not en-

hance their status, but give up their sense of self as they contribute to this ultimate, albeit twisted, fulfillment of patriarchal values.

For their part, terrorist groups will continue to find recruits as long as they can offer women a way out of their societies, a chance to participate as full members in the struggle. As

such, increasing women's roles in peaceful activities, addressing their needs during times of peace and during conflict, and protecting and promoting their rights cannot be an afterthought in foreign policy. The best way to fight the war on terror is to make the terrorist organizations less appealing—to men and to women. ✱

BEST OF THE BULLETIN ARCHIVE:

Women and conflict

- **"Women and the National Security Debate,"** by Rosemary Chalk (August/September 1982). *The feminist movement not only empowered women, it also developed an infrastructure for political action. In the 1980s, women used this political muscle to add their perspective to national security discussions.*
- **"Child Soldiers: What About the Girls?"** by Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay (September/October 2001). *In conflicts throughout the world, young girls are abducted and forced into armed warfare, into roles that leave lasting psychological and physical scars. Yet programs to rehabilitate child soldiers often focus on boys and neglect the girls.*
- **"Unequal Protection,"** by Karen Musalo and Stephen Knight (November/December 2002). *Musalo and Knight, of the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, argue that international asylum laws that are geared toward war refugees need to be revamped to include those fleeing gender discrimination and domestic violence.*

For these articles and more, visit the online Bulletin Archive at www.bulletinarchive.org.

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2. Jessica Stern, "When Bombers Are Women," *Washington Post*, December 18, 2003.

3. Yoram Schweitzer, "Suicide Terrorism: Historical Background and Risks for the Future," June 18, 2004 (pbs.org).

4. Rohan Gunaratna, "Suicide Terrorism—A Global Threat," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, October 20, 2000.

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18. Lucy Frazier, "Abandon Weeping for Weapons," *Online Journal of Education, Media, and Health: Issue on Terrorism*, August 6, 2002 (nyu.edu/classes/keefer/joel/frazier.html).

19. Samiya Sa'ad Al-Din, *Al-Akhhbar*, February 1, 2002.

20. Israel's security forces are aware of more than 20 cases in which women were involved in sabotage activity against Israeli targets. "The Role of Palestinian Women in Suicide Terrorism," January 2003 (mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0n210); Copeland, "Female Suicide Bombers."

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