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Neither Feminists nor Victims: How Women's Agency Has Shaped Palestinian Violence

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CO-EXISTENCE

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OVERVIEW

One of the greatest myths regarding female participation in violent extremism is that the women involved are either radical feminists or weak victims. This myth ignores the nuances of women's agency and the contexts in which they act. It consigns women to being labelled either liberated political actors or victims of circumstance. Through the case study of women's participation in Palestinian violent extremism, this paper shows that women, like men, become violent extremists for myriad personal and political reasons. Women do share at least some of the same motivations as men. However, due to organisational dynamics as well as wider social gender dynamics, women's experiences in violent extremism differ from those of men.

Women can be agents of strategic change in the extremist landscape, influencing other extremists and violent groups themselves.

This paper emphasises the importance of looking not only at the way organisations influence individuals but also at how individuals shape violent extremism. Through their actions, women can be agents of strategic change, influencing not only other men and women but also extremist organisations themselves. Examining this myth in the context of societal differences, as well as women's personal and political motivations for participating in violent extremism, will help explain why some women engage in extremist violence, and what policymakers can do to prevent it.

The views of the author do not necessarily represent those of the Institute.

INTRODUCTION

The myth that women who participate in violent extremism are either radical feminists or weak victims is a false dichotomy. According to this thinking, either female violent extremists act solely under their own free will to advance political causes, or they are taken advantage of, and victimised, by men in a patriarchal society. Today few academics, if any, truly believe that women who participate in violent extremism are all radical feminists or weak victims. But there are facets of this myth that refuse to go away, despite an abundance of literature regarding the complexities of women's participation in violent extremism. Aspects of the myth persist in academic research and mainstream media.

Part of the problem is that the false dichotomy between weak and feminist women is propagated by researchers themselves.¹ In truth, some women who participate in violent extremism may be victims, and some may be exercising their own political agency.² Even if one follows the premise of this division, the participation of women has shifted the modus operandi of some groups. Their agency—or lack of it—has changed the face of violent extremism.

To bust this myth, this paper uses cases from the Palestinian arena to illustrate how this myth overlooks the complexity of women's agency in violent extremism. That agency depends not only on gender but also on a number of other circumstances including societal norms and organisational dynamics and competition.

1 Karen Jacques and Paul Taylor, "Myths and Realities of Female-Perpetrated Terrorism", *Law and Human Behavior* 37, no. 1 (2013): 505.

2 Karen Jacques and Paul Taylor, "Male and Female Suicide Bombers: Different Sexes, Different Reasons?"; *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 4 (2008): 304–326.

WOMEN'S AGENCY

The World Bank has defined agency as “an individual’s (or group’s) ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes”.³ Looking at women’s ability to make such choices when they seek to join violent extremist groups or participate in extremist violence is important because it highlights not only a woman’s role in violent extremist groups but also her ability to act of her own free will. Women’s agency is complex and affected by a number of factors, including societal norms about women’s roles and the violent extremist organisations themselves. It is important when looking at women’s agency not only to look at their personal motivations but also to consider their political motivations, the organisations they are part of and the society in which they operate.

My research on the Palestinian arena divides extremist violence into high- and low-intensity attacks.⁴ The key difference lies in the levels of sophistication, planning and availability of weaponry. A high-intensity attack is a multifaceted one involving planning and preparation, or leading to mass killing and injuries, or both. A low-intensity attack often involves little preparation, or even premeditated thought, and the attacker is likely to use knives, light weapons or vehicles. Furthermore, high-intensity attacks are carried out mostly by organisations, whereas low-intensity attacks are typically carried out by individuals. They often happen without the explicit backing of a group, as they require little to no planning.⁵

Palestinian violent extremism provides a good example of women’s participation in such violence across generations. Studying this case allows for a deeper examination of women’s participation in violent extremism over time. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Palestinian violence consisted mostly of organised high-intensity attacks, and while some women did lead attacks, overall female participation was limited.

3 The World Bank, “Promoting Women’s Agency”, World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development (2012), 150.

4 These are the author’s definitions, which are expanded on in Devorah Margolin, “A Palestinian Woman’s Place in Terrorism: Organized Perpetrators or Individual Actors?”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2016): 1–23.

5 Ibid.

The case of Leila Khaled, a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, is one of the more famous examples of a Palestinian woman playing a leading role in violent extremism. Khaled took part in the hijacking of international flights on two separate occasions. Although her actions brought about much Western media attention, she is just one example; most women in this period were not in command or leadership positions. My research has found only 32 cases of female involvement in attacks from 1967 to 1986,⁶ only three of which were led by women.⁷

The First Intifada, which started in 1987, was a popular uprising that caught the Palestinian leadership by surprise. It began with mostly low-intensity attacks and had higher levels of female participation. Between 1987 and 1993, there were 52 attacks involving women in the Palestinian arena.⁸

During the Second Intifada, from 2000 to 2005, the violence was more organised. While many initial attacks in this wave of violence were low intensity, many of the later attacks were high intensity. This wave of violence also saw the first female suicide bombers, carrying out high-intensity attacks previously carried out only by men. Although women began to conduct suicide attacks, they were still mostly excluded from Palestinian violence at this time.⁹

Between 2015 and 2016, a new wave of violence spread across the Palestinian arena. The surge of violence consisted mostly of low-intensity attacks outside organisational control. This period was marked by higher rates of female participation, with women—most of whom were not linked to any organisation—carrying out 27 of the 170 attacks (or 15.8 per cent) between September 2015 and January 2016.¹⁰ Women who conduct lone-wolf attacks, or who

6 Ibid.

7 Data set created by the author, monitoring attacks between 1965 and 1995.

8 Margolin, "A Palestinian Woman's Place in Terrorism".

9 Maria Holt, "The unlikely terrorist: women and Islamic resistance in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories", *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 3, no. 3 (2010): 365–382.

10 Data set created by the author, monitoring attacks between 13 September 2015 and 23 January 2016. There were a total of 170 attacks. Women carried out 27 attacks and accounted for 29 of the perpetrators. Women carried out 15.8 per cent of the attacks.

operate outside organisational control, can also affect the decision-making of competing violent extremist groups.¹¹

Examining women's participation in the Palestinian arena highlights the role women have played in violent acts since the 1960s. Nevertheless, Palestinian women have historically played a less active role in violent extremism than men.¹² This stems from several factors. For example, women in Palestinian society have more traditional roles that typically remove them from prominence in public life.¹³ Many women do play a role in Palestinian politics, as members of parliament for Hamas or Fatah, but have yet to reach the highest echelons of Palestinian governance, which is still dominated by men, similar to other countries around the world.

Women's roles are also influenced by Islamist groups like Hamas. In its charter, Hamas refers to the Muslim woman as the "maker of men" and notes that women play "the most important role in looking after the family, rearing the children and imbuing them with moral values and thoughts derived from Islam".¹⁴ The charter emphasises women's domestic roles as part of a collective political community, as vital players in disseminating that identity to future generations, and not actors in violent extremism.

Hamas updated its charter in 2017, and in doing so also updated its language and outlook on women's roles. The 2017 Hamas document notes, "The role of Palestinian women is fundamental in the process of building the present and the future, just as it has always been in the process of making Palestinian history. It is a pivotal role in the project of resistance, liberation and building the political system."¹⁵ Women are seen as less passive actors, encouraged to be part not only of the resistance (though it is not specified whether this is ideological or physical) but also of the

11 Thomas A. Koelble, "Review Article: The New Institutionalism in Political Science and Sociology", *Comparative Politics* 27 (1995): 231–243.

12 Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: from liberation wars to global jihad and the Islamic State* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

13 Holt, "The unlikely terrorist".

14 Hamas Charter (1988), The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, accessed 1 June 2015, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp.

15 "Hamas in 2017: The document in full", *The Middle East Eye*, 1 May 2017, accessed 24 August 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-charter-1637794876>.

public political system, emphasising Hamas's state building and governance in Gaza.

DIMINISHED AGENCY

Women's agency in violent acts continues to be diminished because it is examined in gendered terms. While acknowledging the differences between men and women, it is important for policymakers to realise that stereotypes persist for the reasons women participate in violent extremism. For instance, male violent extremists are often associated with a political cause, whereas female violent extremists are typically described as taking part in violence for personal reasons.¹⁶ These include shame; the loss of honour after a divorce, rape or other humiliation; or joining a group like ISIS to meet men and become a "jihadi bride".¹⁷ What is clear is that while men and women both have personal and political motivations for participating in violent extremism, personal reasons continue to be emphasised as a greater motivational factor for women than for men.

This highly gendered lens is used by researchers, politicians and journalists alike. When Wafa Idris became the first Palestinian female suicide bomber in Israel, the media focused on her status as a divorcee and her work with the Red Crescent ambulance service, rather than her political or ideological motivations for carrying out the attack. One article in a British newspaper even described her as "a Palestinian divorcee known for her vivacious manner".¹⁸ It is important to remember that men and women have personal and political reasons for participating in violent extremism, including shame, financial concerns, political motivations and vengeance. Solely addressing the political motivations of men and the personal drivers of women diminishes women's agency. Not all women are alike, and not all women make decisions in the same manner.

¹⁶ Jacques and Taylor, "Myths and Realities of Female-Perpetrated Terrorism".

¹⁷ Brigitte Nacos, "The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar framing patterns in the news coverage of women in politics and in terrorism", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 435–451; Erin Saltman and Melanie Smith, "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (2015): 1–75.

¹⁸ See Phil Reeves, "The paramedic who became another 'martyr' for Palestine", *Independent*, 31 January 2002, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/the-paramedic-who-became-another-martyr-for-palestine-9146000.html>.

Women's agency is complex and nuanced, affected by various societal and cultural factors.

Violent extremist organisations also use a gendered lens to appeal to men and women through ideologies and narratives. Groups like ISIS, for example, speak of the shame of a woman being humiliated and the need for men to avenge her honour.¹⁹ Going back to the Palestinian arena, after Idris's attack, the Egyptian weekly *Al-Shaab* wrote on 1 February 2002, "It is a woman, a woman, a woman who is a source of pride for the women of this nation and a source of honor that shames the submissive men with a shame that cannot be washed away except by blood."²⁰ Exploiting women's participation in violent extremism or victimisation to shame men into action is common. Many violent extremist organisations use gender stereotypes to encourage men to engage in violence. This rhetoric can spur men into action, even though it is often based on an inaccurate portrayal of women.

The myth of the radical feminist or weak victim is wrong as it consigns women to being labelled either liberated political actors or victims of circumstance. This myth ignores the complexities of women's agency and focuses solely on the personal motivations of women without considering their political motivations, societal norms about women's roles or even the motivations of the groups women are involved with. In reality, women's participation in violent extremism is affected by numerous factors, one of which is the organisation itself.

19 Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State", *CTC Sentinel at West Point* 10, no. 7 (2017): 23–28.

20 *Al-Shaab Weekly*, "Wafa Idris: The Celebration of the First Female Palestinian Suicide Bomber - Part II", via MEMRI, 1 February 2002, accessed 1 August 2018, https://www.memri.org/reports/wafa-idris-celebration-first-female-palestinian-suicide-bomber-part-ii#_edn1.

HOW WOMEN AFFECT STRATEGY

Violent extremism does not happen in a vacuum. It occurs in a competitive institutional environment comprising states and nonstate actors, including violent extremist groups. Often, multiple violent extremist groups operate in the same territory. In the Palestinian case, the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Hamas compete to be the voice of the Palestinian people. They compete against one another for primacy, each seeking to best the other by being more attractive to recruits.²¹ This competition influences not only the actions of groups but also the actions of female operatives inside and outside the control of these groups.²²

Women's participation in violent extremism is related to a group's goals and tactics. From an organisation's perspective, women have a strategic (or tactical) advantage over their male counterparts. Given that they do not conform to traditional security profiles, they have increased access to targets and arouse less suspicion, while their attacks garner more media attention. Attacks by women are rarer than those by men. Women's participation calls into question the idea that women are passive or more peaceful than men.²³

Some academics argue that leftist organisations are more likely to initially recruit and attract women due to these groups' goals and progressive ideology.²⁴ Others argue that violent Islamist groups such as ISIS follow strict gendered ideologies that prescribe strict gender roles, inhibiting women's participation in violence.²⁵ My research has shown that some violent Islamist groups, while still adhering to inflexible ideas about gender, are willing to incorporate women into violent attacks when doing so aligns with their goals,²⁶ when they are faced with significant strategic restraints, or even to

21 Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism", *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (July 1981): 379–399.

22 Margolin, "A Palestinian Woman's Place in Terrorism".

23 Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

24 Nacos, "The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media".

25 Nelly Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women From Jihad", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): 780–802; Elizabeth Pearson, "Online as the New Frontline: Affect, Gender, and ISIS-Take-Down on Social Media", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2017): 1–25.

26 Margaret Gonzalez-Perez, "The False Islamization of female suicide bombers", *Gender Issues* 28, no. 1–2 (2011): 50–65.

shame men into action—but always under their strict interpretation of Islamic law and religious edicts.²⁷

By carrying out attacks with women, violent extremist groups shape the actions of others. This is because they open the door for more women to take part. The Palestinian arena is one example of this. During the First Intifada, secular-nationalist Palestinian organisations such as Fatah began to use women in suicide bombing attacks against Israel. On 27 January 2002, Idris became the first Palestinian female suicide bomber in Israel, carrying out an attack for Fatah.

At that time, however, Hamas, the nationalist-Islamist group that now governs the Gaza Strip, refused to allow women to participate in suicide bombings. In response to Idris's suicide bombing, Sheikh Yassin, one of the spiritual leaders of Hamas, said he saw women's participation in suicide bombings as problematic because they required male chaperones. In a 2002 interview with London-based newspaper *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, Yassin further argued,

*At the present stage, we do not need women to bear this burden of jihad and martyrdom. The Islamic Movement cannot take all the Palestinian males demanding to participate in Jihad and in martyrdom operations, because they are so numerous . . . meanwhile, women have no military organisation in the framework of the [Islamic] movement. When such an organisation arises, it will be possible to discuss wide-scale recruitment of women.*²⁸

Demonstrating organisational reluctance to include women in operational activities, Yassin's comments also left the door open for future female participation. His remarks demonstrate the catch-22 faced by many violent Islamist groups: if they exclude women from combat, they could also be negating their own arguments for defensive jihad, which argues that Muslim lands are under attack and need defending, and which provides the jurisprudential backing for their actions. However, if these groups do call on women to

27 Margolin, "A Palestinian Woman's Place in Terrorism"; Winter and Margolin, "The Mujahidat Dilemma".

28 *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, "Wafa Idris: The Celebration of the First Female Palestinian Suicide Bomber - Part I", via MEMRI, 31 January 2002, accessed 26 February 2018, <http://web.archive.org/web/20180226120606/https://www.memri.org/reports/wafa-idris-celebration-first-female-palestinian-suicide-bomber-part-i>.

fight, they could face other problems such as alienating their conservative base.²⁹

On 27 February 2002, Darin Abu Aisheh became the second Palestinian female suicide bomber to carry out an attack in the name of Fatah. However, reports show that Abu Aisheh first went to Hamas for support before being told “your duty is not [to] be a suicide bomber, your duty is to take care of children”.³⁰ Despite Hamas’s refusal to accept her offer, Abu Aisheh was not deterred from carrying out an attack, and she went to Fatah. The group, which at this point had already used one female suicide bomber, was not bound by the same religious and societal constraints as Hamas.³¹

Abu Aisheh’s intent to carry out a suicide bombing led her from one group to another. This would have an effect beyond Fatah. Due to the growth in cases of male suicide bombers, Israeli counter-measures increased. Between 1993 and 2000, 30 per cent of Palestinian male suicide bombers were caught before carrying out their attacks.³² Palestinian women, meanwhile, could still move more freely than men because of the broad perception that women did not commit acts of violence.

The strategic restraints on men (including increased screening or age restrictions on entering Jerusalem), coupled with the successful use of female suicide bombers by groups like Fatah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, helped influence Hamas to re-evaluate its position on female suicide bombing. In 2004, Hamas sent its first female suicide bomber, Reem Riyashi, to carry out an attack. Hamas’s major shift was due to a number of factors. These included the goals of the organisation to win primacy over its competitors, strategic restraints against male operatives, the group’s view of women in light of religious edicts to support their actions, and the women themselves who were motivated to act.

29 Lahoud, “The Neglected Sex”.

30 Suzanne Goldenberg, “A mission to murder: inside the minds of the suicide bombers”, *Guardian*, 11 June 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jun/11/israel2>.

31 Margolin, “A Palestinian Woman’s Place in Terrorism”.

32 Shaul Kimhi and Shemuel Even, “Who Are the Palestinian Suicide Bombers?”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 4 (2004): 815–840.

Women's participation in violent extremism can also influence how other men and women take part in violent activities. Individuals and groups have different motivations, and in many cases they do not line up. Focusing on women's agency, and therefore women's motives for participating in violent extremism, elucidates not only how organisations influence individuals but also the role of the individual in influencing the violence. These women can be agents of strategic change. They can shape the future actions of extremist groups and whether or not they incorporate women as operatives.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The myth of the radical feminist and the helpless victim damages efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE). To gender participation in violent extremism makes CVE policies ineffective, as it leaves major security gaps and allows misconceptions about perceived female weakness or empowerment to misguide policymakers. CVE policies should account for women's roles in society, but they must also consider that personal and political motivations drive both men and women. A problem arises when CVE policy emphasises the personal motivations of women more than those of men.

A lack of understanding of women's motivations and the complexities of women's agency can have serious policy implications. If women are viewed only as victims, they (or organisations) can leverage this misperception to more easily access attack targets, even working undetected to recruit or fundraise for an organisation. Academics and policymakers must understand that not all women are the same, while simultaneously trying to see trends in groups and acts of violence.

CVE policies need to address the diversity among women and their motivations. To categorise women as a monolithic group allows for gaps in policy. Policy approaches need to take a broader view. They need to account for women's roles in society and public life, as well the reasons behind their participation in violent extremism.

In addition to understanding the complexities of female motivations for involvement in violent extremism, it is also important to understand women as agents for strategic change. Individual women, just like men, can create change in organisational decision-making through their actions. As can be seen in the case of Palestinian female suicide bombers, the actions of Wafa Idris and the women who followed in her footsteps have had a lasting impact on all organisations operating in the Palestinian arena.

Just as women can be agents for change in the extremist landscape, they can also be agents for change in countering extremism. However, it is important not to overemphasise women's roles in CVE, specifically in cases where they play a secondary role in an organisation or societal dynamic. Otherwise, CVE policy risks

falling into those same gendered stereotypes this paper argues should be avoided.

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