

FEMALE ROLES RELATED TO IEDs

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Women were often accused of being the root causes of armed conflicts, although most of these stories are apocryphal. Whether the cause or not, women's participation in war was traditionally limited to supporting functions. Their role has changed drastically during recent years, shifting from being supporters to being active combatants. Nowadays, IEDs are present in urban areas and they are easy to conceal and operate. These qualities make them suitable for females to execute a lethal IED attack.

This paper exposes what kind of motivations women have to assist with or even commit brutal terrorist attacks, and also how they exploit their femininity in the process.

Keywords: female, suicide bomber, attack, IED, risk, explosive.

“Cherchez la femme”¹ as the French say. When somebody sought the causes of a conflict the truth revealed consistently that through history at the root was a woman. Although it may only be a myth, one of this kind of famous “root cause” was Helen of Troy whose abduction by Paris (Prince of Troy) brought about the Trojan War.

Women were not just the driving force of the clashes but from time to time they were active participants in it. During the World Wars they had mostly traditional supporting roles in the rear e.g. as a worker in the supply factory or as a nurse in the hospital. The history of female suicide bombers does not date back for hundreds of years, more like thirty. The first one is believed to be Sana'a Mehadli, member of the Lebanese National Resistance Front, who detonated herself and a car filled with explosives

in 1985 as an attack against Israeli occupation.² Women's role in modern warfare ranges from being wife of the fighters³ to helping insurgents to carry out an attack against military troops stationing in the area. As IEDs become a serious risk factor for homeland security and attacks happen not only in theaters of war but also more often in urban environments, female actors have greater involvement in delivering this kind of weapon. Their leading role is striking.

PERPETRATORS

How astonished we were when we learned that the mastermind of the San Bernardino attack was a female who previously had been reported to be too weak even to carry a weapon⁴? At the company holiday party she and her husband carried out a mass

1 Literally means “look for the woman”

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sana%27a_Mehaidli

3 Some estimates say ten percent of Europeans traveling to Syria to join the ISIS jihad are women, and they hold important - but usually non-combat - roles within the terror organization.

4 During the investigation authorities found pipe bomb-type devices, many components of which could be used to construct IEDs and many rounds of ammunition in their home.

shooting at a community center in San Bernardino, California, that left 14 people dead. They also had three pipe-bombs with them but luckily they were poorly constructed and failed to explode. The couple seem to have been “self-radicalized”. She allegedly pledged allegiance to the ISIS leader on Facebook in the midst of the attacks. Her daughter was only 6 months-old at the time of the attack.^[1] The female involved with the latest Paris attacks was described as not even being religious but somehow from one day to the next she became deeply radicalized. She wanted to join ISIS and when she failed to travel to Syria, she offered her service to commit terrorist attacks in France. And so she did, and helped her cousin, the presumed ringleader of the Paris attacks.^[2]

The cruelty of an IED attack that kills innocent civilians is always shocking. Moreover, when the action is carried out by female it is even less understandable. How can someone, who can experience the mystery of creation of a new life from her own body, intentionally take away a life? Instinctively we start to seek what drives them. Generally, those who are so called “lost souls” with hopeless futures are easy targets of recruitment for radical groups who turn them into suicide attackers. Girls abused as sex slaves are often psychologically damaged and, therefore, more vulnerable. Motivations can also be to wash off the shame caused by being raped because they have to face stigma and rejection by their family or community. Often they were hurt by previous attacks or experienced personal loss during a war. Those women who have nothing to lose are very determined to get revenge and this makes them a serious threat. That is why in Moscow’s train station the arriving trains only from Chechnya are subject to search. These trains are most likely to carry “Black Widows”⁵, the female suicide bombers longing to avenge their loss.^[3]

As we learned from experiences in the London

subway, on a Madrid train and lately at Brussels and Istanbul airports, a suicide attack against a public transport network can be devastating. Terrorists use this method again and again because the detection of these walking bombs in the crowd is nearly impossible.

Females under their traditional Muslim clothes can easily hide 5-10 pounds of TNT plus a few hundred ball bearings on a well-tailored suicide vest or belt. If they pretend to be pregnant this amount of explosives can be substantially more. As they walk, let’s say hand in hand with a smaller child, even the most suspicious people would not identify them as a danger. They often take advantage of being hard to identify under this attire and easily mingle in the mass; as happened to the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi who was assassinated by a woman wearing an RDX⁶ explosive-laden belt. In May 1991, Gandhi was at his campaign rally just before the election when a female (linked to LTTE⁷) stepped to him for greetings then she bent down to touch his feet and detonated the belt tucked below her dress. Both of them and 14 others were killed in the explosion.

In conflict zones women are used to deliver explosives for a suicide attack under their clothes taking advantage of the fact that because of sanctity of a woman’s body, searching them is a very sensitive issue for male military policemen. This is one of the examples where gender perspective has to be taken into consideration and more female military police should be sent to the operational area.

Wearing the burqa is such a perfect way to hide or to be hidden that men have also worn the garment to smuggle themselves and munitions through borders or other forbidden zones. Some men caught by Afghan border police had IED vests and some had AK-47s under their burqa.^[4]

Another testimony of what a serious security risk burqas can conceal is represented in VBIED

5 It is a term for Islamist Chechen female suicide bombers who lost their husbands, brothers or close relatives in one of the two Chechen wars that Russia fought against Islamist rebels.

6 Abbreviation from Research Department Explosive or Research Department Formula X, it is an explosive more powerful than TNT

7 Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – terrorist group.



Figure 1. Last pictures before the assassination ⁸.

cases where explosives were found in the back seat of a car covered by burqas to deceive security forces. From a distance it seemed that women were in the car.

Besides these “traditional” ways of delivering explosives, lately much more sophisticated ways have emerged. In 2010 everybody was on alert at Heathrow Airport after hearing that terrorists planned attacks on flights adding liquid explosives

into female breast implants. Surgeons place a small packet of a sealed plastic explosive (e.g. PETN) into the implant then the suicide bomber uses a syringe⁹ to inject a chemical trigger (e.g. TATP) to the packet to detonate the bomb.^[5] In a unique case, a surgically inserted IED - stitched inside the abdomen of a 29-year-old man - was found by doctors conducting his autopsy.^[6]

There are many other places in the human body

8 http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140220/jsp/frontpage/story_18001721.jsp

9 Medical excuse like diabetes legitimize syringe to be easily passed through security checks.



Figure 2. Men wearing burqa as disguise.¹⁰

where this kind of “container” can be placed e.g. men also can have “six-pack” (abdomen) or buttocks implants. However, because of its water content the human body absorbs a large percentage of the shock of explosions, and as a consequence these types of devices must be planted near the surface of the body.

The fact that current detectors do not see deeper in the human body is an advantage for terrorists who use internally concealed devices in their body cavities. These items are designed for rectal and/or vaginal insertion to smuggle IEDs through the security checkpoints.

This new method of smuggling is undetectable by the current airport scanners. Most of these detectors are not able to filter what is inside the implants. Equipment

designed to be effective against this type of threat is very expensive and needs more time for screening. They would slow passenger flow and the radiation effect of the screening device may cause health risks as well.

The unique technology of DEXI (diffraction-enhanced X-ray imaging) promises “less radiation, more information” by analyzing the X-rays that are scattered or refracted by soft tissue or other low-density material. In this way the device can detect substances such as explosive materials, narcotics, and low-density plastics hidden inside or outside of the human body. The radiation emitted by current scanners does not penetrate beyond the tissue under the skin but the new millimeter-wave scanners’



Figure 3. IEDs concealed beneath burqas¹¹.

10 <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/97860/terrorists-drag-bombs-beneath-burqa-phyllis-chesler>

11 Teenage Female Suicide Bomber Phenomena in Nigeria, published by Terrogeance (www.terrogeance.com) pp.15



Figure 4. Simulated explosive mixed with ball bearings.¹²
Image Copyright © 2010 Securesearch, Inc.

waves are thought to damage tissues and cause cancer in some travelers.^{[7][8]}

TOOLS¹³ OR VICTIMS

In 2015 the number of countries that experienced suicide attacks had increased to 21 - more than ever reported before. In the 248 incidents more than 9000 civilians lost their lives. Suicide attacks accounted for 56% of the 16,180 civilians killed or injured by all IEDs worldwide.^[9]

Losing their sources of military aged males, terrorist groups have turned to less valuable assets – according to their culture – like females. According to Amnesty International, Boko Haram has kidnapped about 2,000 women and girls since 2014 for use as cooks, sex slaves, fighters and “suicide bombers”. In Cameroon, 80 percent of the recently recorded suicide bombings were carried out by girls and young women aged 14 to 24 years. Some young children do not even know that their basket or the package that they are sent to the market with is filled with explosives. These devices are most often remotely triggered.^[10]



Figure 5. Teenage girl wearing IED belt¹⁴.

PREVENTION

Civil-military Cooperation (CIMIC) experts exploit females' matriarchal protector role of the society and build it in their daily work. For example in the US Army Cultural Support Program¹⁵ female soldiers' primary task is to engage a host nation's female and adolescent population in support missions where their interaction with male service members may be deemed culturally inappropriate.

Success of this kind of program was reported in an ISAF operation in a village where the threat of IEDs was high and the general security situation was very poor. Female teachers were asked for advice about where to set up checkpoints. As a result of their advice a positive effect was achieved and better village security was measurable. Additionally, and as a direct consequence of this intervention, the number of IEDs also significantly decreased around the area.^[11]

Education of the younger generation is also important in many ways. In those countries where men cannot teach female students the female teachers have a responsibility to instruct girls to better protect themselves against these devices.

12 <http://www.securesearchinc.com/body-cavity-insertable-ieds-internally-concealed-devices-simulated-explosive-mixed-with-bbs/>

13 According to UNICEF, there were 44 child “suicide bombings” in West Africa last year, up from four in 2014 mostly in Cameroon and Nigeria.

14 <http://reporters365.com/2015/01/68407/boko-haram-and-the-use-of-teenage-girls-as-suicide-bombers/>

15 <http://www.soc.mil/CST/about.html>

Women are often responsible for the household, and in no small way this extends to the safety of their family. Consequently, one potentially effective strategy can be targeting women with the message that handing in illegal weapons can be part of the successful peace-building process. When they are aware of the risks associated with having illegal weapons and ammunition in the home, especially for children, they take action in collecting them. This is an important step that prevents the remnants of war being turned into the main charge of IEDs.

CONCLUSION

In summary one can agree with the French; women are really deeply involved in most events that permit conflicts around the world. Especially now, when they have “successfully” elevated their status to an equal level with male insurgents for terror attacks, maybe as a part of a misinterpreted feminist ideology. Terrorist groups prefer to use women and girls as suicide bombers because they are thought less likely to arouse suspicion, although this presumption may be changing. Because of the prevalence of female suicide bombers, UAE¹⁶ has just suggested to their travelers to refrain from wearing the traditional dress to avoid handcuffing by the police. This only leads to bigotry and heightened Islamophobia.

Without becoming paranoid, as the examples presented in the text above show, we should consider women just as dangerous as men when we look for potential attackers. The wise way of protection would give more opportunity to female engagement in C-IED activities, since based on their dissimilarity by gender they have alternative approaches to find solutions. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



LTC Zsuzsanna Balogh has been working for the Hungarian Ministry of Defence since 1989 and has been employed in a number of different posts; all related to infrastructure. She has a civil engineer and architect background.

In 2013 she earned her PhD - defending buildings, military camps against (IED) blast attacks - from the National University of Public Service, Budapest. In support of her studies, she was a team member of a 2-year-long EU funded Defence Research of Critical Infrastructure project. Within these studies, the team analysed viable techniques to defend buildings against blast attacks from multiple points of view. LTC Balogh was responsible for examining the blast effects on buildings, identifying ways to prevent attacks and suggesting methods to reinforce the buildings. LTC Balogh now serves as project manager in NATO HQ SACT in Norfolk, Virginia, USA.

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