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Al Qaeda's Female Jihadists: The Islamist Ideological View

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Unlike their male counterparts, the status of women in radical Islamist ideology is not conducive for participation in the global jihad. Yet there has been a sharp increase in the number of female suicide bombers linked to Al Qaeda. How can this be explained?

Trend in female suicide bombers

ANALYSTS have pointed to a rising trend of female suicide bombers in various parts of the world since the year 2000, involving members of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka but more recently Al Qaeda in the Middle East. In 2008, the number of female suicide bombers linked to Al Qaeda has suddenly spiked to 35 attacks, a sharp increase from seven in the previous year. All attacks were linked to Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Similarly, the Al Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has also claimed it uses women in their bombing campaigns. In September 2008, the police in Algeria foiled a plan to deploy a female suicide bomber to attack military barracks there.

Several women have been identified occupying prominent roles in Al Qaeda. Many radical websites mentioned a woman known as Umm Salameh, a widow of an Al Qaeda leader in Northern Iraq, who supposedly serves as the emir of the 'Al Nitaqayn'- the women's battalion in Al Qaeda. This is a significant point to note because in April 2008, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda no.2, denied the existence of any women in Al Qaeda. Similarly, Istisam Adwan, known also as Umm Fatima, was arrested by Iraqi authorities in September 2008.

Referred to as the 'mother of all female suicide bombers', she warns of the existence of a group of women, mainly widows of Al Qaeda members, who are grooming younger acquaintances for deadly attacks. In January 2009, Samira Ahmed Jassim was arrested by the Iraqi authorities. During investigations she had claimed herself the same title and confessed to recruiting vulnerable women in the country and persuading them to become suicide bombers.

Previously, women were not known to take part in the operational activities of the Al Qaeda. This was understandable given the perspective on women's roles and status in conservative Islamist ideology.

The Islamist perspective on women in jihad

The Islamists' interpretation of the role of women in jihad is historically derived. Women's roles in jihad are conventionally through indirect contributions. They are restricted to logistical support such as tending to the wounded and providing emotional support to their male family members, relatives and acquaintances. A woman should ideally prioritise her responsibility within the family and is never disassociated from her motherly and marital duties. Al Qaeda draws upon historical accounts and the thinking of fundamentalist thinkers such as Hassan Al Banna and Sayyid Qutb who were strong proponents of the conservative perspective on the role of women.

In his 'Declaration of War against Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places' in 1996, Osama bin Laden made clear his stance on the role of women in jihad. Theirs is to motivate and encourage their male counterparts. He made no reference to their operational roles. Al Zawahiri, in denying there were any women in Al Qaeda, asserted that the mujahideen women were playing their roles taking care of 'their houses and sons'.

So if there is no change in the stance of Al Qaeda against female participation in the frontlines of jihad, how does one explain the rising trend in female suicide bombers in AQI and AQIM? Many Muslim women expressed their disappointment and protested against al-Zawahiri's statement, demanding a bigger role in jihad for the women.

Explaining the rising trend of female activism in Al Qaeda

There are various reasons for the growing trend of female suicide bombers and the increasingly visible roles of women in Al Qaeda. First, female operatives suggest the weakening of the Al Qaeda organization as a whole. Allowing them in such operations may be an indication that Al Qaeda is facing a shortage of manpower and possibly a shrinking support base. It is possible that the employment of women is a new recruitment strategy to make up for this lack of manpower.

Second, the rising trend indicates that such attacks have been effective in meeting the intentions of the organisation. In highly conservative Muslim societies, women more easily penetrate security checkpoints as male officers are not willing to conduct more thorough searches on them. Furthermore, there is a lack of female officers in the security forces. Bombs and weapons are also very easily concealed under the loose garments commonly worn by women in the Middle Eastern societies such as in Iraq.

Another pertinent factor to consider is the context where these attacks are taking place. Desire for revenge is a strong motivator. It is noteworthy that most of the Al Qaeda female bombers profiled have family members or acquaintances who are either part of Al Qaeda or have been arrested or perished in the war. The main sources of female suicide attackers are areas that have been badly hit by war as such circumstances breed a vicious cycle of revenge.

The situation in Southeast Asia

Contrary to the situation in Iraq, there have been no reports to date of female operatives in any of the extremist groups in Southeast Asia that espouse radical Islamist ideology. Female personalities associated with the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a known affiliate organization of Al Qaeda in this region, are known to have been involved only in supporting roles such as administrative functions or ideological support through the family unit. The focus is more on becoming the ideal '*Muslimah*' (female Muslims) to conform to the perspective on women in Islamist ideology.

It is important to note that like Al Qaeda, violent Islamist extremist groups in this region are weakening and acts of violence are losing popularity amongst supporters and sympathisers. Radical

groups and extremist organisations are turning to a softer approach via the propagation of ideology through peaceful means that is seemingly more effective. Thus, the female members of the movement are able to perfectly assume their roles as the medium of radical ideology.

Future trends: Female jihadists in cyber space

Another significant development pertaining to the involvement of women in global jihad is the propagation of radical ideology through the Internet. Malika El Aroud, known as Oum Obeyda in the cyber world and widely known to intelligence officials across Europe, declares herself as a female holy warrior for Al Qaeda. She has made a name for herself in many radical forums where she encourages men to join in jihad and rallies women to support the cause

Her case is an indicator of where the next battleground for jihad will take place -- where women do not have any restrictions in order to participate. Perhaps the trend of female suicide bombers will remain restricted to the war-stricken areas where physical battles are being waged. But the ideological warfare occupies a far more unrestricted and vast battleground where 'female fighters' are able to join in the ranks at the frontline. This scenario shows that the global jihadist movement is altering its strategy to a softer approach that is more effective and popular than random acts of violence.

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