

A TRAGIC TREND

Why Terrorists Use Female And Child Suicide Bombers

By FR. JOHN SAWICKI, CSSp, PhD

The Oct. 10, 2015, suicide bomber attack at the village of Baga Sola in Chad killed and wounded dozens. Amid a long litany of terrible attacks launched by the Islamist group Boko Haram, this one was notable not so much for its severity, but for its perpetrators: one male, two females and two child bombers.¹

Suicide bombing used to be a disturbing phenomenon. It has become so common that now it is the phenomenon of women and children as the human bombs that causes remark. Employing these protected persons as agents of terrorism once would have been unthinkable, as well as unbelievable. Today, from North Africa to Central Asia, it has become commonplace. How did this happen? Why does it happen?

THE PROBLEM OF TERRORISM

Terrorism is not new to human experience. The *Sicarii* of Jesus' day and the Assassins of the Middle Ages were transnational, well-organized terrorist movements.² Four great periods of global terrorism have confronted the modern era: the anarchists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the anti-colonial movements of the 1930s through the 1960s, the ideological movements of the 1960s through the 1990s, and now a global wave of terrorism that seems to have religious roots.³

Despite this, no universal definition of terrorism exists. Instead, governments tend to define certain acts as being illegal and may occasionally call them terrorism. But there is no comprehensive, international definition of the term, despite there being 13 separate treaties and four U.N. Security Council resolutions to address its threat.

For the purposes of this article, terrorism

means egregious acts of violence perpetrated against innocents (noncombatants) to instill fear and coerce the behavior of governments. As former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher noted, terrorists depend upon "the oxygen of publicity," and their acts often are staged for a public audience with the intent of amplifying the effect of that fear.⁴

The key here is to understand terrorist movements and acts not as the deranged violence of crazy, murderous monsters, but as the deliberate choices of rational people who select outrageous violence as a policy option. Terrorism is not an inanimate force of nature, but, rather, a deliberate instrument employed for political goals by intentional actors. On occasion, some of the immediate executors of these actions may be irrational, unstable or unhinged, but their manipulators and planners are not.

The ultimate goal of terrorist movements is

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to expose the inability of governments to protect their societies, thus to compel concessions to the terrorists' causes. Where that end cannot be achieved because either the government is too powerful or the cause is too impossible, a steady diet of pain and suffering for the target country becomes the terrorists' surrogate goal.

UNDERSTANDING SUICIDE BOMBERS

Terrorist employment of suicide bombers goes back decades. Inherently low technology and almost inexhaustible in supply, human bombs have become a potent threat only since the early 1980s, when the use of suicide bombers made the attacks against American, French and Italian Marines in Lebanon so devastating. In Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam seemed to hone the technique to deadly effectiveness in 1983, as their struggle against the government ignited.⁵ The technique's real power, however, asserted itself in the late 1990s during insurgencies directed against Israel, and later against various Western (chiefly American) forces operating in the aftermath of 9/11 during conflict broadly named the War on Terror.

It is important to realize that sometimes the bombers are individuals who are willing to die for a political cause, or they believe dying to be preferable to life for various reasons, including the belief that they will go straight to heaven and that martyrdom is a noble fate. For terror groups, there are many reasons why suicide bombing is a desirable tactic, including:

- **Drama.** At least initially, such actions are dramatic. Their perpetrators and casualties are headline catching, sudden and emotionally eviscerating.

- **Cost effective.** The rough average at the height of the 2002 Palestinian suicide bombing campaign against Israel was about 20 Israeli dead or wounded for each attacker lost. It would be wrong to insist that the attacks are cheap; they are not, once their full logistics are understood. What they are is a method likely to produce a deadly result — the important goal of terror violence.

- **Plans can have a long shelf life.** The Oct. 12, 2000, attack against the USS Cole in Yemen's Aden harbor had been organized months before, but the planners waited for a suitable target before expending the bomb boat.

- **Huge media payoff.** Images and video of sui-

cide bomb attacks can be broadcast, posted online and played over and over, by both international media and the terror organization itself.

- **Relatively little risk for the terror masters.** The planners and most of the logistical personnel are seldom exposed and usually escape to organize other attacks.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN AS BOMBERS

The use of women and children fits into this schema because both groups are privileged non-combatants, protected universally under the Geneva Accords as well as several other international treaties. More importantly, almost every society has a revulsion to harming these two classes of human beings. Therefore, being able

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to employ women and children — who serve willingly or unwillingly — as human bombs can yield enormous tactical advantages along with the shock value. Compared to a man wired with explosives, women and children are likely to be able to approach a target more easily, evade scrutiny and, in general, catch the target with its guard lowered.

If the security forces identify a female or child bomber, the act of stopping them by killing them is a public relations coup for the terrorists. The video of that act can be used in propaganda efforts ceaselessly. Security forces can become so sensitive to the risk of female and child bombers that they may overreact preemptively, leading to the propaganda value of “the State is killing unarmed women and children.”

Most importantly, women and children are vulnerable populations who may be more easily coerced and controlled in many situations than their male counterparts. Not surprisingly, the world now is reading more and more examples of female and child suicide bombers, though their recruitment and use can differ.

WOMEN SUICIDE BOMBERS

Generally, there are some specific reasons a



woman would want to play the part of suicide bomber, according to the vast amount of literature on the subject:

■ **To battle against the humiliation of the target's oppression.** For example, to strike against those who have occupied her village, or to fight foreign troops in her country.

■ **To demonstrate dedication to a cause.** Some might view suicide terrorism as a cowardly act, but it is one that requires substantial presence of mind from the bomber. Women are seen as second-tier citizens in many societies; performing such extreme violence is a signal act of commitment and can have a riveting effect on the male fighters.

■ **To achieve important gains for the family.** In many cases, being a female suicide bomber combats the patriarchal society she lives in and dramatically increases her and her family's social capital, not to mention elevating the general status of women in their social world. The highly staged theatrics of the suicide attack — followed by public funerals produced on a large scale — can ensconce the bomber's family within the society.

■ **To gain celebrity.** Suicide bomber attacks are recorded, memorialized and posted on the internet as recruiting tools. There is a daredevil, exciting aspect to the attacks that appeals to some individuals looking for a way out of their lives and into notoriety.

Data on the recruitment of women and their radicalization for violence as suicide bombers is highly anecdotal, but there is a large body of evidence indicating many female bombers do not volunteer to kill themselves. They are coerced.

Women may be forced into suicide bombing through personal desperation, pressure from their families and, most chillingly, rape. The Chechen terrorist attacks in 2002 on the Nordost Theater in Moscow and in 2004 on a school in the Russian town of Beslan featured a group of women known as Black Widows. These were Chechen women whose husbands had been killed fighting Russian security forces during the Second Chechen War, or, in some instances, had lost all their male relatives. The women chose suicide operations both in rage against their targets and in despair over their own situations.⁶

Far more disturbing is the wide employment of rape to destroy women and girls psychologically and socially — thus compelling them to see their

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deaths in so-called martyrdom operations as the only way to re-establish their honor.

Forensic investigation of suicide bombings cannot always yield clear pictures, but one of the most graphic came from Iraq in January 2009, with the arrest of Samira Ahmed Jassim.⁷ She was nicknamed locally *Um al-Mumenin* (Mother of Believers), and is accused of coordinating the rape of 80 young Iraqi women in order then to recruit them as suicide bombers. She told them it was the only path to redemption for the dishonor rape brings to a woman and her family. She is said to have sent 28 women to their deaths.

Using women as suicide bombers offers extremists significant advantages. Media attention is about four times greater for attacks by women (and children) than by men. Because of their voluminous garments, women can avoid detection more easily and often are searched less stringently. Women are better at gaining access to targets. Also, some extremist organizations consider women more expendable than men, and the use of social pressures, especially the disgrace of rape, may make women more easily manipulated.

CHILD SUICIDE BOMBERS

As late as 2013, the employment of children as suicide bombers was almost unheard of as a terrorist tactic. The strategic goal tended to be acculturating children to grow up as fighters in the terrorists' cause and make death a chosen future. Suicide bombers were role models in the radicalization and recruitment process for youth. For example, CDs in the Pashto language for recruiting boys in Pakistan, with music and a video of a suicide car hitting a military van in Barmal, Paktika Province (Afghanistan), were captured from Taliban camps.

In Pakistan, the transformation of children into suicide bombers became visible in the mid-2000s as terrorist forces were raiding religious schools (madrassas) and kidnaping students. In sub-Saharan Africa, Boko Haram's 2014 kidnapping

of more than 200 Nigerian schoolgirls marked a sharp rise in the appearance of child suicide bombers from that year onward.^{8,9}

As human bombs, children offer some of the same tactical advantages as women, in that they often are not suspected to be carrying explosives and can approach a target more easily than a man can. Children are even more easily manipulated, particularly in some cultures, than women are. Their status is inferior, and there is considerable temptation for them to try to increase it.

Also, a child's understanding of death is at best fractional, and younger minds can be more susceptible to indoctrination if there is no competing narrative from family members or others. Group identity is important to them and can be used in recruitment. Societal or cultural pressures can make violent groups seem attractive to young people seeking role models, adventure or just peer status.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The recruitment and radicalization processes for all suicide bombers are highly emotional.¹⁰ To be effective, counter-narratives also must be emotional. The West's approach to social engineering tends to be cerebral and based on reason, but such processes are unlikely to blunt the visceral identity politics terrorist groups use to mobilize recruits.

The psychology of suicide bombing clearly puts vulnerable populations at particular risk of exploitation. By raising the socioeconomic status of women, all societies armor themselves from violence to some extent. There is a causal relationship between raising the education and income of women and a decrease in terrorist violence of all types.

For children, the key to their use as suicide bombers often lies in the inability of their families or government to keep them physically safe. Absent mass kidnapping by terrorist groups, it is hard to see how the growing phenomenon of child suicide bombers would exist. An individual child might be used so cruelly, certainly, but not large cadres of children.

The Global Terrorism Index, using 2014 as the last full year for assessment, notes that deaths from terrorism have increased from 3,329 in 2000 to 32,685 in 2014.¹¹ Actual statistical evidence for the number of suicide attacks by women and children is only beginning to be fully documented, but the trend is clear — and it is a terrible develop-

ment in a race that our world cannot afford to lose.

FR. JOHN SAWICKI, CSSp, is director of the Center for International Relations at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh.

NOTES

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