THE “NEW PHENOMENON”: AN EXAMINATION OF AMERICAN MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIM FEMALE SUICIDE BOMBERS

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ABSTRACT

Within most societies women’s traditional roles are those of nurturers and caregivers. When women break from these conventional norms, society is forced to rationalize the disconnect with the traditional schema. Often described by American media as the ‘new phenomenon,’ female suicide bombers are presented in a way that highlights the discomfort and fascination with women in combat roles. This paper will look at the caricatures of female terrorists in the news and answer the question; does the American media present an accurate portrayal of female suicide bombers? Recent publications have presented a general overview of female combatants within the international media. My research is focused upon the specific terrorist act of suicide bombing and how this act defies the American media’s prescribed roles of women. I plan to use a qualitative approach to research. Along with the above-mentioned publications, I will be primarily using a LexisNexis comprehensive search including print news, Internet articles, radio and television transcripts. I will look at the length of the news stories and frequency of selected terminology.
Inclusive in the search will be an analysis of the frequency of articles that focus on male suicide bombers as oppose to women suicide bombers. Generally the male suicide bomber is portrayed in American news as a crazed religious fundamentalist with no other background added. In contrast, reports of female terrorists often focus on descriptions of their physical appearance, family life, background and their emotional state. I will use applied research, focusing not on cause and effect relationships but commonalities and patterns that exist in the framing of female suicide bombers in contrast to the coverage of male bombers. And lastly, examine the impact of these news presentations and a recommended course of action. Given the correlation between the media and terrorist acts, it’s imperative that the media present female suicide terrorism in a way that does not promote further acts.
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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary mass news media – newspapers, magazines, radio and television- have undoubtedly affected the way in which we perceive and interact with other cultures. These mediums help determine our perspective of the world. Given the current media climate both in the United States as well as internationally, news is commonly viewed and interpreted through a short tagline, thirty-second news clip or compact online article. This news environment has provided the impetus for further misrepresentations of other cultures, most markedly in the illustration of the Middle East. Traditionally the average American has known little about the Middle East. While the landscape is very diverse, full of vibrant cultures, religions and distinctive lifestyles and stories, the American media has focuses on portraying militant Muslim combatants and political and religious strife as the primary narrative.

Most recently, the Muslim narrative has fixated on female suicide bombers. Often described by American media as the “new phenomenon,” female suicide bombers are presented in a way that highlights the discomfort and fascination with women in combat roles coupled with the intrigue surrounding Muslim women. Within most societies women’s traditional roles
are those of nurturers and caregivers. When women break from these conventional norms, society is forced to rationalize the disconnect with the traditional schema. This paper will look at the presentation of Muslim female terrorists in the news and answer the question; does the American media present an accurate portrayal of Muslim female suicide bombers? And address the implications of this rendering.

It is first necessary to outline the parameters by which the paper is defined. For the purpose of the American media focused analysis, the United States State Departments' definition of terrorism will be applied, “Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”¹ While the United States defines terrorism in this way, there is not a universally accepted definition of a terrorist or terrorist organization. Another term that will be used frequently in the following pages is media, which includes American prime time television news coverage, newspapers, magazines, scholarly articles and radio

transcripts. Worth defining as well is the term suicide terrorism, the targeted use of self-destructing humans against noncombatants to effect political social or religious change.\(^2\) Although a suicide attack aims to physically destroy an initial target, its primary use is typically as a weapon of psychological warfare intended to affect a larger public audience,\(^3\) thus implicating a strong relationship with the media to further promote in the aftermath of a terrorist act.

This paper will provide a comprehensive look at the history and recent media portrayal of Muslim female combatants. Central to this analysis is the examination of the history of the usage of the terms terrorist and terrorism and their introduction and presentation in the media, which will be addressed in chapter 1. Chapter 2 will provide an in-depth look of the effects of the terrorist attacks on September 11th and resulting islamophobia in addition to the growing mystique and intrigue of Muslim women in news media. Chapter 3 will provide a case analysis of print and television stories about prominent


Muslim female suicide bombers. Lastly, Chapter 4 will provide real world implications of the American media portrayal of these women and a projected course of action.
CHAPTER 1

TERRORISM: PERCEPTION AND REPRESENTATION

Terrorism has been regarded as both the “conflict of our time”\(^1\) and as “rooted in history.”\(^2\) Although the methods and technology have evolved, combatants still view terrorism as an effective means to an end. From radical non-state actors to worldwide terrorist organizations, terrorism continues to spread and evolve. The recent focus on terrorism in the American media may lead one to infer that terrorism as an act of war and defiance is a new form of combat, however the history of terrorism is centuries old and one that has undergone many changes; these changes include its definition, the methods and tactics of terrorist actors and the ways in which the media has portrayed these actors and acts of violence. As the threat of terrorism becomes increasingly more global, it is important to examine these events of systematic violence and how they are presented to the public, so as not to further the cause and message of terrorist organizations.

\(^1\) Richard Clutterbuck, *Guerillas and Terrorists*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 112.

The word terror is of Latin origin and is translated “fear” or horror.”

While terrorism has existed for centuries, the term was first used during the French Revolution. In 1792, the Jacobins came to power in France and initiated what was labeled La Terreur or the Reign of Terror. During this time, thousands of French citizens were executed by the newly invented guillotine. The Jacobin leader, Maximilien de Robespierre called terrorism "an emanation of virtue." In 1793, he stated, "Terror is nothing but justice, prompt, severe and inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it is not so much a special principle as it is a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country’s most urgent needs.”

Originally an instrument of the state, the regime was designed to consolidate the power of revolutionary government, protecting it from elements considered subversive.

Terrorism was initially a positive term, Robespierre and his supporters viewed it as vital if the new French Republic was to survive its early stages. Robespierre like many contemporary terrorists saw systematic violence as an

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effective means to an end, ironically he and his advisors died at the very hands of the guillotine he created. The aftermath and failure of the Revolution contributed to a shift in the usage of the word; the term terrorism began taking on the negative connotation it carries today. One of the first writers to use the word "terrorist" in English was Edmund Burke, a vocal enemy of the French Revolution, for him a terrorist was anyone who attempted to further his views by a system of coercive intimidation. Burke denounced the terrorists, calling their acts abhorrent and unjust.

During the 19th and 20th centuries another shift occurred changing the focus from violent intimidation committed by governments to violence committed against the government. Anti-government terrorists emerged into the forefront of public discourse. The violence was often motivated by political, nationalist or religious grievances and aims. Common amongst many terrorist actors were a distinct set of demands and grievances directed toward outside entities; these outside entities ranged from political parties and racial groups to entire cultures. In the case of Al Qaeda terrorists, their target audience has been stated to be the United States and the perceived cultural

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hegemony that is being oppressed upon them. Radical groups along with larger anti government movements desiring national liberation began emerging around the world and terrorism began to acquire its contemporary universal stigma.

Central to the shift in connotation and definition of the term terrorism was the concurrent development of ethnic nationalism and new ideologies such as communism. Terrorist groups with nationalist agendas formed in every part of the world. For example, the Irish Republic Army grew from the desire of Irish Catholics to form an independent republic, rather than being part of Great Britain. Similarly, the Kurds, a distinct ethnic and linguistic group in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq, sought national autonomy. The Kurdistan Workers Party formed in the 1970s, using terrorist tactics to announce its goal of a Kurdish state. Another example was the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam using suicide bombers and other terrorist tactics to fight for independence against the Sinhalese majority government. The destruction of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut in 1981 marked the first major

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contemporary suicide attack in the Middle East. The attack left 27 dead and over 100 wounded. International news media around the world broadcast these events on news streams and highlighted the destruction on their front pages allowing the terrorists message to last long past the date of the accident.

Suicide bombing became a strategic political weapon and in several countries it eventually became a recognized act of servitude to God. Terrorists began using these tactics with more precision with the help of new technological innovations in bombing. The events at the 1972 Munich Olympics were another politically motivated terrorist act utilizing new technology to promote their attack, Black September, a Palestinian group, kidnapped and killed Israeli athletes preparing to compete in the Olympic Games. Black September's political goal was negotiating the release of Palestinian prisoners. Their aim was to spread their message through igniting fear and commanding the attention of the international community. Although the methods and techniques of terrorists may have changed, the aim still

\footnote{Weinberg and Eubank, “Problems with the Critical Studies Approach to the Study of Terrorism”, 247}
remains the same, to use the act of violence as way of instilling fear in a
group of people with the hopes of gaining some desired outcome.

Terrorism has always generated strong emotions and greatly divergent
opinions and images of it. The popular image of the contemporary terrorist
has been that of a bomb-throwing anarchist, disheveled, with the black beard
and satanic expression.\(^8\) 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
transformed the role of women in combat. The first known bomber was a 17-
year-old Lebanese girl named Sana’a Mehaydali, a member of the Syrian
Socialist National Party a secular Lebanese organization.\(^9\) Sana’a Mehaydali
blew herself up near an Israeli convoy in Lebanon in 1985 killing and injuring
20 people. Female bombers have spread to other parts of the globe, including
Sri Lanka, Turkey, Chechnya, Palestine and Israel. Worldwide, approximately
17 groups have started using suicide bombing, with women operatives


2003, 1A, 35.
accounting for 15 percent of those attacks.\(^\text{10}\) Most have belonged to secular separatist organizations, such as LTTE and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, but in recent years women suicide bombers have emerged in religious organizations as well.

Even in violent roles within terrorist organizations, female terrorists may be portrayed as the chaste wives and mothers of revolution by their supporters. Bombers are often eulogized and revered as martyrs in their home countries. When Wafa Idris became the first female Palestinian suicide bomber to attack Israel in January 2002, an Egyptian newspaper wrote, "The bride of Heaven preferred death to the pleasures of life, so as to convey a powerful message to the Arab nation."\(^\text{11}\) 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."\(^\text{12}\) A growing number of insurgent organizations have adopted suicide bombing not

\(^{10}\text{Ibid.}\)

\(^{11}\text{Safwat Al-Sharif, Al-Quds Al-Arabi, February 2, 2002.}\)

\(^{12}\text{Yoram Schweitzer, "Suicide Terrorism: Historical Background and Risks for the Future," Public Broadcasting Station, June 18, 2004, pbs.org (accessed June 30, 2009).}\)
only because of its tactical superiority to traditional guerrilla warfare, but also
because suicide bombing, especially when perpetrated by women and girls
gets significant media attention both domestically and abroad.

While domestic media outlets characterize these bombers as mothers of
the revolution and daughters of the struggle, international American media
seems baffled at their existence. American media stories are constantly
asking why these women become suicide bombers. The assumption is that a
women could not be capable of such atrocities without some abnormal outside
authority causing these actions while men are assumed to simply be violent by
nature. The defining characteristics of a suicide bomber, in general, are
elusive. Contrary to popular perception and media representations, they not
unbalanced sociopaths prone to self-destructive tendencies nor are they only
poor, uneducated religious fanatics. These female bombers, while their
actions may or may not be justified have the same goals and aims as male
suicide bombers and terrorist organizers.

One of the premier practitioners in the study of terrorism, Walter
Laquer wrote, “Terrorism is dangerous ground for simplificateurs and
generalisateurs." To approach the subject, an objective viewpoint is essential. It is vital that the way in which these acts are presented and portrayed are objective, so as not to mislead, justify or promote these acts of extreme violence. Since inception, terrorism has fascinated the public and also caused immense fear and stereotypes to emerge. The 1980’s saw increased news coverage contemporary terrorism. On average the *Times* was featuring 4 stories on terrorism per day. This increased focus on terrorism was met with much skepticism and concern. Terrorists are very skillful in the use of the news media and the enhanced news coverage to inform their tactics and enhance the strength of their campaigns. Terrorism is an act of propaganda, the very existence of terrorism is arguably permanently linked to the media. “The terrorist act, in and of itself, communicates that change can occur and the violence of the act commands the attention of society. The propaganda effect is in the act of securing the attention of the populous and

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then providing the message through the violence.” Violence is news, while peace and harmony are not. One must be careful not to assert that journalists are terrorist sympathizers or that because the depictions of terrorists are not always accurate that that somehow validates their methods. The terrorists need the media and journalists fulfill their needs of an exciting story when they cover these events.

Much of the analysis of the success of terrorist missions hinges on the coverage shown by the media. Cherif M. Bassiouni described the connection between the media and terrorist actions to be a “symbiotic relationship,” each relies on the other to meet their goals range from higher ratings to the spread of a terrorist organization’s intended message. Shortly following September 11, the American media and people had come to an agreement of the typical terrorist profile. In both news and popular culture, representations of the Middle East primarily focused on a fundamentalist fanatic Arab or Muslim male with no reason or recourse for his actions. Journalists became familiar with and reproduced this image for the American public. With the added

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emphasis on terrorism and homeland security this image was at the forefront of American media and news stories. The emergence of prominent female terrorists and suicide bombers has played upon the stereotypes and perceptions of the American medias’ prescribed definition of who a terrorist is and what a terrorist looks like.
CHAPTER 2
ISLAMOPHOBIA: EXAMINING THE DEPICTION OF MUSLIM MEN AND WOMEN

The terrorist attacks committed on September 11, 2001 left a lasting impression that still resonates in many aspects of American society. The attacks, orchestrated by Osama bin Laden, a Muslim extremist unfortunately fit perfectly into the constructed stereotype of the Middle East. For centuries the Middle East has been characterized by Western cultures as irrational, backwards and violent. Edward Said called it orientalism, a structure that imposes pre-conceived notions on the fabric of Middle-Eastern identity and culture.\(^1\) One such misrepresentation is that Islam is an inherently violent religion; the terrorist attacks along with the longstanding discord between the Middle East and the West has manifested into a phobia of Islam depicted through images, discourse and the lack of representative portrayals of Muslim men and women in the media. These depictions have included the prominent image of Muslim men presented as fanatics determined to destroy whatever

and whoever opposes their views. Divergent to the representation of Muslim men, Muslim women have traditionally been depicted as helpless victims of oppression perpetrated by the males in their society. The introduction of Muslim female suicide bombers has directly opposed this portrayal and challenged these accepted frameworks. The following chapter will examine the varying media representations of Muslim men and women and examine how they are evolving.

Islamophobia is defined as the unfounded fear of and hostility towards Islam. Such fear and hostility leads to discrimination against Muslims, exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political or social process and stereotyping among a host of other consequences. In a study conducted by the The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, researchers found that a plurality of Americans, 46 percent, believe that Islam is more likely than other

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religions to encourage violence among its believers. The American perception of Muslims is characterized by a lack of understanding and fear. People are not born with these fears and perceptions; they are instilled through many mediums, from academic study, social interactions and media outlets such as newspapers, the Internet, the news and various forms of entertainment. Although phobias are defined as fears created by irrational precepts, they are also promoted through practices and actions.

Given the attacks committed on September 11\textsuperscript{th} and the declarations of them as being in the name of Allah, this newly renewed fear of Islam was completely within reason. The attacks claimed the lives of 2975 victims on that fateful afternoon and instilled a certain fear and uncertainty amongst American people. Bin Laden claimed the attacks were aimed to “kill

Americans anywhere”⁵ and that it was his duty as a Muslim to do so. Along with the fear that was created on that day, a general feeling of nationalism spread throughout the country as well. New stories searched for ways to garner American camaraderie in these times of fear and uncertainty. The discourse was focused on recreating a cohesive American community rather than reporting the in depth complexities of Islam. This foundation, allowed for the further perpetuation of fears and stereotypes that had historically existed surrounding Islam.

The Orient and the Occident

In order to analyze the current portrayal of Muslim men and women in the media it is imperative to look at the narrative that precedes it. There is a long standing history between “the Middle East” and “the West”. Even those very labels are fabricated constructions, what exactly are “the Middle East” and “the West”? These two categories were created to establish a framework where the West, which included parts of Europe and America were seen as

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civilized, religious and righteous and “the Middle East” was a term created to encompass a vast array of different cultures as “others.” Following this logic, the Middle East and its most prominent religion, Islam was regarded as uncivilized and primitive. Since Christianity was considered the true religion, then naturally Islam was not considered a false belief system. Those who perceived many Islamic nations as a growing threat also supported this construction. Dr. Hitti writes in his book *Islam and the West* that in medieval literature Mohammed is generally displayed as an imposter, a false prophet, the Koran as a fabrication and Islam as an immoral way of life. He states:

> Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and other less highly developed religions were never subjected to such a barrage of abuse and condemnation as Mohammadanism was. They posed no threat to the Medieval West and offered no competition. It was therefore primarily fear, hostility and prejudice that colored the Western view of Islam and conditioned its attitude. Islamic beliefs were enemy beliefs and, as such, suspect if not false.  

The categorization of Islam as invalid and wrong gave credibility and support to counter the growing threat of Islamic nations. This belief reinforced the concept that the male ‘Muslim savage’ needed to be feared, dominated and

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conquered while Muslim women, shown covered and veiled were sympathized and seen as oppressed by their male counterparts. These ideas have been reinforced in major news publications including, *The Economist*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S News and World Report*. Recent headlines from these publications include “The Dark Side of Islam,” “America vs. Islam,” “The Islamic Threat,” and “Should We Fear Islam?” A feature article in *U.S News and World Report* pronounced:

> In the Muslim world, this nostalgia has smoothed the way for something no Western society has endured—the radicalism of “God’s fanatics whose doctrines guarantee backwardness and self destruction and a Manichaean war between the “good” Muslim world and the “evil” West.”

This bipolar comparison of Islam and the West will continue to prevail if there is not a conscious effort to present another narrative.

September 11, 2001

The terrorist attacks committed on September 11th drastically contributed to the fear and discord surrounding Islam. The attacks, committed by radical, extremist Islamists created a climate of fear and anger surrounding

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the actors of those events. The American people and journalist alike had to try and comprehend the actions of men who claimed to be acting in the name of Islam. To discount the real fear and anger surrounding these actions and the connection between Islam and the devastation of that day would be unfair.

Journalists rely on news frames that simplify and prioritize news to fit into existing societal concepts, values and knowledge. These frames convey dominant meanings, and are based on the prevailing societal narratives.10 They often are formulated by prominent political figures and disseminated through the media with the hopes of influencing public opinion. Take for example the political discourse following the terrorist attacks on September 11th. Henry Kissinger called the time “a morality play between good and evil.”11 The crisis was clearly framed within a “good guy”, “bad guy” dichotomy, highlighted by President Bush’s “either you’re with us, or you’re with the terrorists” declaration.12 The terms Islam and terrorist became linked

10 Norris, Kern and Just, *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government, and the Public* (Great Britain: Toutledge, 2003), 23.

and almost synonymous. The American public was inundated with terror alerts and warnings of violence from Islamist militants, further contributing to the fear of Islam.

Military psychologist Lawrence LeShan talks about how ordinary citizens experience war, from the outside perspective. When ordinary people experience a traumatic event on a national level or enter into a war, such as the attacks committed on 9/11, they shift into a ‘mythic’ mode of thinking. This mythic mode of thinking frames the world into ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and patriotism becomes the prevailing sentiment. Patriotism in times of a national crisis can manifest itself both positively and negatively in the media. While the goal is to garner strength and bring the country together, it can also dismiss and silence alternative viewpoints that are not in accordance to politically accepted ideas. Those journalists reporting alternative views of Islam and terrorists are threatened with the label of being unpatriotic. A *Columbia Journalism Review* article examining editorials written in the top

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12 George W Bush, “Address to Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” (September 20, 2001)
newspapers six weeks leading up to the Iraq war documents an “astonishing failure” to “exercise skepticism” of administration claims.\textsuperscript{13}

Media theorists call this a spiral of silence, a phenomena that occurs when a particular message or sentiment dominates society and individuals.\textsuperscript{14} Despite the journalistic principle of objectivity, the media of a country usually reflect their government’s foreign policy in the reporting of the news; this concept is not unique to the America. The coverage of events in Muslim-majority countries by Western media is generally carried out in the framework set by powerful Western governments. The tendency of American reporting to frame the region within the historical constructs that present Islam as a violent, illegitimate religion combined with the lack of knowledge about the religion furthered the bias towards Islam in the media.\textsuperscript{15} A 2004 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that two-thirds of

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American journalists working for national organizations believe that increased “bottom line pressure” was damaging the credibility of the news and “the media as paying too little attention to complex stories.”

Islamophobia: Muslim Men and Women In Discourse

One of the major trappings the media falls into is viewing and portraying the “Muslim world” as a monolith in which all members are the same. While the followers of Islam constitute a vast diversity of peoples residing in virtually all countries in the world composed of different cultures, languages and religious doctrine, the Muslims shown in American media are primarily of Middle Eastern decent. This presentation can be likened to the comparison of an evangelical fundamentalist Christian from Texas to a Catholic follower from Spain, the differences can be infinite. Another constant theme in the media is to use the term Arab and Muslim interchangeably. Equating Islam and Muslims with the terms Arabs and Middle East are misleading, Arabs only account for a small number of the Muslim population across the world.

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The “Muslim world” extends far beyond the Middle East, as recent as the last few centuries Muslims have migrated to many parts of Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas and Australia. Apart from the 47 Muslim majority states, there are several countries in which the majority follow Islam, particularly Asia and Africa. \(^{17}\) Said argued that the very notion of Islam as an unchanging monolith is misguided, he wrote in *Covering Islam*, the following:

> Reasoned, well researched, alternative views have been barely evidence; the market for representations of a monolithic, enraged, threatening, and conspiratorially spreading Islam is much greater, more useful, and capable of generating much more excitement, whether for the purposes of entertainment or of mobilizing passions against a new foreign devil. \(^{18}\)

Analysis of American coverage of the Islam and the Middle East highlights the lack of time that reporters get to gain expertise in the region. Said contrasts them with European journalists such as David Hurst of the *Guardian*, who spent three decades covering the Middle East, this dedication to understanding Islam and its many followers is lacking in American media.


A major factor that contributes to Islamic stereotyping in the West is the media’s language used when describing Muslims. Some common names heard or portrayed in the news about Muslims are "extremist" or "terrorist." These words are misleading and are mainly anti-Islamic. Contributing to the inaccuracy of reporting on Islam, the Western media is also very influential to its audience’s assumptions about Muslims, such as the assertion that all Muslims are fundamentalists. Another commonly misunderstood term is jihad. Jihad literally means "the struggle in the path of God," or "holy war," however, the term has been subject to many abuses not only at the hand of the media but terrorist leaders as well who use it to support their aims. Western media often abuses the meaning of jihad by referring to it solely as a holy war where Muslims unreasonably kill non-believers. Jihad can mean a number of things that a Muslim does for the sake of God. A student working for good grades, individuals pursuing equality and justice for all people, honoring your parents, a mother giving birth to a child, as well as a suicide attack can all be considered jihad.

It is beyond dispute that the militants who carry out acts of terrorism in the name of Allah harbor a deep commitment to their religion and pose a
serious danger to national and international security. However, while religion is certainly a contributing factor among those who become suicide bombers or terrorists, it does not mean Islam is the impetus for that militancy. Fanaticism as an explanation for terrorism also ignores the political and social grievances of the region.

The media infrequently distinguishes between the religion Islam and the political affairs that occur in Islamic countries. For instance, the actions committed by Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War were not Islamic, but actions committed by a man who was Muslim. Yet the media continues to fixate on the notion that Islam creates war-crazed violent people. For example, to help put things into perspective, Hitler was a person of the Christian faith. This does not mean that all of his actions were consistent or representative of Christian beliefs. Similarly, Saddam Hussein was of the Islamic faith, but all of his actions do not necessarily represent Islam. Steven Hoffman explains in his book, “Islam and Democracy, Micron Levels of Compatibility,” how the media ferments a biased picture of Islam. He asserts that journalists are not interested in good stories but stories with an angle. Suicide bombing,
particularly those bombings perpetrated by women present a unique
opportunity for the media to exploit a new angel to the story.

Islamophobia and Image

Images capture the human mind in the most primitive and simplistic
way. Upon first glance they do not require much thought by the viewer; they
transcend language and level of education to the simplest form of
comprehension, what one sees. Jack Shaheen’s studies on Arab images on
television concluded that the media perpetuates four basic stereotypes of
Muslim men: “…they are fabulously wealthy; they are barbaric and
uncultured; they are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery; and they
revel in act of terrorism.”19 As a result of these stereotypes, Muslim men have
been dehumanized in the minds of many Americans, including reporters who
present a one-dimensional view of Islam. This dehumanization has in some
ways rationalized the horrific nature of many terrorist attacks. The images
used in the portrayal of Muslim men in the media are central to the depiction
of Muslim rage.

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19 Jack Shaheen, The TV Arab (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State
Muslim men are often shown in the media committing violent acts, looking disheveled and erratic or as a cult of obedient followers. Osama bin Laden, possibly the most notorious Muslim figure in American media today, is important to the discourse. To the American public, Osama bin Laden represents all that is evil; he has made statements denouncing the United States and expressed the desire to kill Americans; the attacks on September 11th remain a reminder of his sentiments. Although he is an extremist, he is often seen as representing all Muslims. There are not many images of other Muslims in the media today that are equally popular and well known as that of Osama bin Laden, therefore his look: the natural beard, turban, darker skin complexion has become a characterized profile for all that America fears. Viewers rely on visual contexts to create frameworks of understanding. While the viewer knows that there are billions of Muslims in the world, if they only see one image constantly then the deeds of that representative begin to be equated with the group, in this case Muslims.

The growing fascination with a young man named Shakeel Ahmad Bhat is an example of the power of an image. To many online users he is better known as Islamic Rage Boy. Shakeel Amhad Bhat is a political activist in
Srinagar, India who has recently gained popularity as an Internet figure. His image has been the inspiration for a number of islamophobic cites and news stories. His photograph has been captured and reproduced all over the Internet. Type his nickname into a search engine and it will produce over 75,000 results. He is always shown irate, eyes bulging, mouth open in an enraged scream, furrowed brow with fists clenched. He has inspired a cartoon character and merchandise. His image is often superimposed on familiar popular American scenes, such as the image displayed below. In this image his face is shown on a cereal box created to resemble the popular all American cereal, Raisin Bran. Although the image is made in jest, there are obvious islamophobic messages within it. The juxtaposition of the everyday typical wholesome breakfast cereal with an irate Muslim man on the front highlights the orientalist perception of America being wholesome and pure and Islam as an angry violent religion.
However, there is something to be said of the quality of the news source. The Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) conducted a study of public knowledge and attitudes about current events and the war on terrorism. While the PIPA study concluded that most Americans, over sixty percent held at least one mistaken impression, the researchers also concluded that Americans’ opinions were shaped in large part by which news outlet they

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relied upon to receive their information. With any subject matter there is the possibility of a host of incorrect and unreliable information especially when it comes to Internet material. One would hope that the viewer would be able to discern between credible representations of Muslims and that of the Islamic Rage Boy sort. But the popularity of this caricatured image is problematic. Growing numbers of people worldwide are using the Internet as a source of news and entertainment. Islamic Rage Boy is just one of many examples of images that contribute to the negative stereotypes of Muslims in the media.

In the present climate of virulent islamophobia, mainstream American culture seems to favor Muslim women who, unlike their brothers, husbands, fathers, or sons, are not seen as a menace to American society, but rather as victims of their own religion or circumstances. The impulse to save Muslim women from their male counterparts pervades various media sources.\(^1\) Muslim women have traditionally been shown in Western media in veils and covered from head to toe. Women in Palestinian society for example, have

traditionally assumed roles of nurturers, working as teachers and as homemakers. They live in a society in which political activism and violent leadership is seen as a strictly male realm. With the start of the first Infantada in 1987, however, Palestinian women began to take on a prominent role in the violent political movement. In 2002 the first female Palestinian suicide bomber detonated a bomb in Israel, killing herself and one other person and injuring over 100 others. This event took Western media by surprise challenging them to respond to the violent attacks and make sense of the occurrence. Suicide bombings by six other Palestinian women occurred shortly thereafter. In contrast to the depiction of male suicide bombers, news stories focused largely on the physical appearance of female suicide bombers and their personal backgrounds. *Billings Gazette*, a newspaper based out of Chicago, showed a photo of Wafa Idris holding an unidentified baby in a story about her suicide attacks in Jerusalem.
Despite this change in role, Wafa Idris, pictured above, was still presented as a mother rather than a violent terrorist. Stories chronicled her life prior to the bombing examining all of the reasons she may have contributed such a violent atrocity.

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CHAPTER 3
PROFILES OF FEMALE TERRORISTS

Dan Berkowitz identified several representations the American media uses to portray female suicide bombers, the results of his research suggested that journalists manage different news items by adopting mythical archetypes. An archetype is defined as a story repeatedly used to describe new occurrences; no version is definitive, yet most can be identified as the same basic tale within a culture and sustaining many years.¹ The “woman warrior” is one particular archetype he found used repeatedly in the depiction of female suicide bombers. The woman warrior, exemplified in characters such as Joan of Arc and Xena Warrior Princess, represent a familiar portrait of a female combatant. Another familiar archetype used frequently in the depiction of female suicide bombers is that of the “helpless victim” and “damaged goods.” The most prevalent representation of the helpless victim is the presentation of female characters in fairytales, the innocent woman from meager beginnings who’s taken advantage of and must be rescued by a man. By using these familiar archetypes media practitioners present stories that are familiar and

resonate with their audience despite it being a new and often uncomfortable occurrence. This chapter presents the profiles of three prominent female bombers, examining their media presentation, specifically how the “woman warrior,” “helpless victim” and “damaged goods” stories are used in the presentation of their actions.

These frameworks, that of the “woman warrior,” “damaged goods” and “helpless victim” represent differing presentations of women dissenters throughout history. The woman warrior has included the following characteristics – toughness, smartness, beauty, sexuality and defiance with varying strengths of each occurring over time. Representative images are seen in media such as the popular television program Charlie’s Angels or movie characters in films such as Tomb Raider and Mulan. Female suicide bombers are almost equally presented using the “helpless victim” framework, studies of gender stereotypes in popular media, such as television and film have confirmed this pattern, the majority of female characters are presented as

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victims to violent or emotional tragedies despite their often violent actions.³

The idea of women being “damaged goods” largely ties into traditional gender hierarchies and the deviation from cultural roles. Women are characterized as “damaged goods” after being divorced, when they are unmarried at an age that is considered to be old, barren or a woman who has been involved in some form of infidelity or perceived promiscuity. These familiar frameworks for women dissenters may help resolve a need to understand our perceptions of gender and violence, but one must ask if these stories contribute to or deter from the objective analysis and understanding of the actions of female combatants.

Wafa Idris

Wafa Iris’s story and violent acts have been interpreted and portrayed in several different ways. On September 27, 2002 Wafa, a Fatah activist, detonated a bomb in Jerusalem, killing one and injuring over 100 others.⁴ Her attack occurred the eve of a speech by Yassir Arafat proclaiming to women,


⁴ J. Bennet, “Israelis Declare Arab Woman was in Fact a Suicide Bomber”, *New York Times*, February 9, 2002.
“You are my army of roses that will crush Israeli tanks.”

Her portrayal has been presented as both that of the woman warrior and revolutionary figure and that of a disgraced and manipulated woman. In a commentary in the Chicago Tribune, a terrorism expert noted, in reference to Idris, that by “attacking the Israelis, these female suicide bombers are fighting for more than just national liberation; they are fighting for gender liberation.”

The Tribune reporter pointed out that the funeral held for Wafa Idris, the first Palestinian woman to carry out a successful suicide mission, “looked like a feminist rally, with hundreds of women paying her homage. Female students all over the West Bank and Gaza City say they want to be next in line for a bombing mission.”

This presentation shows Wafa as a revolutionary figure, uniting and leading a movement.

Initially Western reports questioned if Idris’s intentions were in fact to detonate the bomb. Reports speculated that she may have detonated the bomb

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7 Ibid.
by accident. A *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* article described her as a, “sweet-natured woman” with “curly brown hair” that did not wear a headscarf, but perhaps had a “secret life.” Journalists have found it difficult to reconcile the conflicting social stereotypes of feminism and violence. One reporter described the conflict as follows:

The construction of a ‘terrorist’ is a highly masculine one, whereas the perception of femininity excludes the use of indiscriminate violence. Not surprisingly, when a woman terrorist is represented, her culpability as an empowered female employing traditionally masculine means to achieve her means very rarely emerges. She is seldom highly reasoned, non-emotive, political animal that is the picture of her male counterpart; in short, she rarely escapes her sex.

Given these admitted challenges and biases, this made the presentation of female suicide bombers like Wafa Idris much more difficult. Varying news articles focused on the personal details about Idris’s life that would explain her violent acts. An article used a quote from an Israeli expert as representative of all female suicide bombers. The quote framed the actions of

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all bombers as motivated by factors outside of those of the typical male bomber:

With female suicide bombers the same pattern repeats itself. There are always some family problems – divorce, infertility, or the male authority figures around them are weakened by sickness or death. There is always something about female suicide bombers that is a rupture from the usual social pattern.\(^\text{10}\)

Wafa was also presented in a way that highlighted these very characteristics; it was suggested that she was unmarried, divorced, barren and potentially having sexual relations outside of marriage. A prominent representation of Wafa as “damaged goods” was the recurring reference of her inability to have children. Not only was Wafa presented as a warrior fighting for a cause, but publications also tried to rationalize her violent acts and characterize her as a woman with nothing to live for.

Although those narratives were primary about Wafa Idris, they were not the only messages presented by journalists. Journalist Barbara Victor questioned whether her “female despair” was that much greater than that of

her male counterparts. Radical aggression committed by female combatants is seen as highly masculine, leading to a desire of the presenter of information along with the audience often times to attempt to rationalize the actions of these women. It seems unnatural that women are capable of violence, the blame is often assumed to be with an abusive father, a manipulative husband, brother or other male relatives. Victor discusses several encounters with Palestinian women in her book, *Army of Roses*. In one encounter a woman states, “American women talk constantly of equality. Well, you can take a lesson from us Palestinian women. We die in equal numbers to men.” Victor suggests in her writing that the choices made by female suicide attackers are voluntary and well thought out. However, she is just one of the few journalists presenting this perspective to the American public.

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Ayat Akhras

Ayat Akhras’s media portrayal clearly exhibits the American media’s focus on physical appearance and femininity in several news stories of female terrorist attackers. Akhras was the daughter of two Palestinian refugees; she was described as a straight A student with hopes of attending college and becoming a television reporter. Akhras grew up surrounded by the political violence of the Palestinian and Israeli conflict. During the Second Infantada, several members of Akhras’s family were wounded and killed by the Israeli Defense Forces. Soon after, a close friend was killed by a stray bullet while playing with his toddler. This is thought to be the trigger that led to Akers’s ultimate decision to join a Palestinian terrorist group.

At age 18, Akhras was one of the youngest Palestinian bombers to commit a suicide attack. In March of 2002 she detonated a bomb killing herself and two Israeli citizens. News reporters likened her to a Middle Eastern folk singer, “with ruby red lips and black headscarf.”14 Her attack received even more media attention than Wafa Idris as she not only killed

14 Kevin Toolis, “Why Women Turn to Suicide Terrorsim,” 2.
herself but also two other young people, one of whom was a young woman around her age. After the attack the media focused on the age and sex of Akhras and her victims. Media reports were particularly fixated on her young female victim. In a story titled, “HBO Doc Explores Mirror Images of Suicide Bombing” the New York Daily News compared the physical resemblance of Akhras and one of her victims Rachel Levy, posting the two images of the women prominently next to each other at the start of the news story, before any text. The initial shock of seeing two young women, both young and relatively attractive, below the morbid title seemed incongruous with what is typically associated with young teenage women. The text that followed similarly focused on the trivial aspects such as their appearance, dress and likeness to one another.
Figure 1. Ayat Akrhas and Rachel Levy Pictured at age 17.\textsuperscript{15}

The titles of news stories and television programs mirrored the same largely gendered portrayal of Akhras’s actions. CBS News called their piece on her actions, “The Bomber Nextdoor’ 60 Minutes II: What Makes a Suicide Bomber Tick?” Correspondent Rebecca Leung describes her actions in the following way, “But there are no women heroes, no Joans of Arc, in Islamic tradition. That is, until now. And that’s the cultural revolution springing out of the West Bank today.” Throughout the piece they juxtapose the descriptions and images of Akhras and her female victim Rachel Levy:

Rachel walked up to the entrance of a supermarket in southern Jerusalem, armed with a shopping list for her mother’s Sabbath dinner. At the same moment, 18-year-old Ayat arrived, armed with something else, a belt of explosives was wrapped around her waist. The two girls entered the supermarket together and died together.16

This depiction is highly sensationalized and detracts from examining Akhras’s violent actions.

The New York Times titled a piece about Ayat Akhras, “Mideast Turmoil: The Terrorist; Daughter Concealed Angry Soul of a Martyr.” In the news story, the reporter chronicles the day of her attack. He describes her

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walk to her high school just like that of any other young teenage girl. “She was only a teenager going about her daily routine. After school she would come home and help with cooking, laundry, and ironing.” The story ends with a statement from her grief stricken father, "I taught my children to love others," he said. "We hope for life." The conclusion of the piece with a statement so far from the horrific violent actions that took the lives of two young people and injured several others fits perfectly into the gendered framework of women being seen as innocent and incapable of violence. After reading the piece, the reader is left to decide whether they are more upset with the bombing or to mourn for the young teenage girl, who they present as just an average teen. While both feelings are natural given the subject matter, the kind of emotion and sympathy that is generated makes these stories of female suicide bombers so popular and allow terrorist organizations numerous times to proclaim their messages.

Reem Saleh Al-Riyashi

In January 2004, Hamas sent its first female suicide bomber in cooperation with the al-Aqsa Brigades. Reem was much different than the Palestinian bombers who had come before her. She was not divorced, single or a woman scorned. Reem was a married twenty-two year old woman with two young children. Stories reported multiple explanations of her background and motivations for her involvement with the terrorist organization. Reports stated that she was trying to atone for her adultery, and that her husband had driven her to the bombing site. These speculations were never confirmed as true. Reports also questioned her motives and if she voluntarily committed the violent attack. Many of the reports about her actions seemed to be a mix of rumors, stereotypes with few facts included. During the time of her attack Hamas leaders had declared that they would only support women suicide bombers who had somehow brought shame to their families and tarnished their family’s honor. An action such as adultery would condemn a young bride and thus might account for the reports of adultery being her motivation for committing the attack. Taking into account the general attitude of Hamas leaders towards women, this form of logic seems pretty intuitive, but on the
other hand, it also confirms Western stereotypes about gender disparity and hierarchy in the Middle East.

The *Daily News* entitled a story about Reem Saleh al-Riyashi, “Tot Pushed to be Like Bomber Mom.” The opening line of the story reads, “The next wave of Palestinian suicide bombers could include little girls with ribbons in their hair.”\(^{18}\) The story shows a photo of the deceased bomber in a headscarf and army fatigues holding a large rifle. In front of her, her daughter stands smiling with some sort of explosive in her hand as well. This photo aims to shock the reader and feed into the framework that suicide bombers are damaged goods or unfit mothers. Another story entitled, “Palestinians Shocked at Use of Suicide Mother,”\(^{19}\) chronicles the woman’s actions prior to detonating her bomb. She was observed as being disabled and therefore not checked as thoroughly. The omission of the word bomber in the title and substitution of the word mother changes the focus from her actions to

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who she is. This change does little more than to promote a sensationalized story.

Figure 2. Reem Saleh al-Riyashi pictured with her daughter.  

Women Weapons

The media repeatedly referred to Muslim suicide bombers as “weapons.” They are not just women with weapons or women carrying

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bombs; their very bodies are imagined and described as dangerous. For example, a *Time* magazine headline spoke of “female sexuality used as a weapon,” and *The Times* described Palestinian women suicide bombers as “secret weapons” and “human precision bombs,” “more deadly than the male.” The media was full of articles referring to the American invasion as liberating Muslim women by “unveiling” them. President Bush talked about freeing “women of their cover.” The actions of Palestinian women suicide bombers have reportedly led several Islamic clerics to proclaim that women, like men, can reach paradise through their bombings, despite earlier beliefs that women could not be holy martyrs.

The implications of women being accepted as suicide bombers by secular and religious terrorist organizations alike are culture changing. Training women from conservative religious groups required several clerics to loosen restrictions on their dress, freedom of movement and contact with men outside their families. After 19-year-old Hiba Darahmeh blew herself up on behalf of Islamic Jihad in May 2003, one influential cleric said that she didn’t need a chaperone on her way to the attack and that she could take off her veil because “she is going to die in the cause of Allah, not to show off her
beauty.” Conservative religious restrictions on women’s movements and their bodies have lessened as leaders have realized the strategic value of women as weapons of war.

The images of female dissenters have evolved. Women do not just carry guns or raise and support terrorist sons; their very bodies have become instruments of violence. To complicate the notions of femininity and motherhood even further, 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. Fighters distinguish themselves this way in order to penetrate crowds of people more effectively and to avoid detection, assuming, correctly that they would not be frisked or subjected to intense scrutiny. In 2003, Hamada Jaradat wore an explosive belt around her waist in order to mimic pregnancy. Jaradat’s bombing killed nineteen civilians and received worldwide news coverage. More recently, the idea of violence empowering women has spread throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This militant involvement by women has had an extreme

\footnote{Kelly Oliver, *Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex and the Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).}
effect on the existing norms of Palestinian society, which has historically had a cultural set of rules that describe and limit gender roles.

Palestinian women have taken a particularly prominent role, as a subset of Muslim women acting in terrorist organizations. The first wave of these Palestinian women who became shadidas had varying backgrounds: one ambulance worker, one seamstress, two in college, one in high school, one law school graduate, and one mother of two. Some analysts have suggested that a shared characteristic among them: they were misfits or outcasts, young women who found themselves, for various reasons, "in acute emotional distress due to social stigmatization." 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

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by their own actions or the actions of other family members.  

24 Allegations abound that the first female Hamas suicide bomber, Reem Riyashi, a mother of two, was coerced by both her husband and lover as a way of restoring family honor after an extramarital affair.  

25 Yet regardless of these bombers’ motivations and intentions, it is important that their actions be taken and presented with the same seriousness as those of male bombers

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25 Ibid.
CHAPTER 4:
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE AND PROJECTED COURSE OF ACTION

The impact of the American media’s failure to report Muslim female suicide bombers accurately extends beyond the American audience. The reality is that American media is a global forum, the images and stories are shared all around the world. The perception of Muslim women and men, at times, is painfully distorted. The key problem is a lack of cultural relativity, which allows one to interpret another cultural by its own standards rather than using familiar American standards. Unfortunately, selective and unfamiliar aspects of a particular Muslim country are projected as if they were universally practiced traditions of Islam. The presentation of Muslim suicide bombers reflects upon the perception the media has of the social status and capability of Muslim women and female combatants. The threat of fanatic Islamist groups is real and dangerous, however, the representations of certain terrorist actors in a monolithic and sensationalized way is problematic in that it often times does not address the true issue at hand. Beyond the social and cultural ramifications, these renderings threaten international security and
allow for terrorist organizations to further their disruptive messages through the strategic use of female suicide bombers.

Women’s Evolving Participation

Terrorist organizations are increasingly facing operational constraints that raise the probability and desirability of the strategic use of female terrorists. The risks of these operations include: male arrests, detention and counterterrorism profiles. Tom Hutchinson argued that women’s mobilization into these groups in many ways is not counter to cultural norms, women are often encouraged to participate in these groups because they can in some ways maintain the same roles that they play in their traditional society. Women are encouraged to participate as suicide bombers, to continue the very mothering and sacrifice that they engage in their daily lives.¹ The decision to become a suicide bomber is arguably the greatest sacrifice, one’s life. In regards to these missions being a continuation of their ‘mothering’ roles, potential bombers have been told that they can create another tomorrow for their

children and their society by sacrificing in this way and contributing to suicide missions.

Select Islamic leaders have been eradicating intellectual and more importantly religious obstacles to the inclusion and strategic use of female suicide bombers, either through their silent acceptance of violent practices or their vehement support. One clear case of the changing role and acceptance of female combatants is the growing involvement of female suicide bombers among the Salafi Global Jihadi movement. The Salafi Global Jihadi movement, known to be uniquely hostile to women, has taken an about face in their stance on women’s involvement in their campaign. In order for women to be included in their movement the group needed religious justification for the inclusion of women in their missions. There has been an emphasis on women as mujahidat, female martyrs. In their promotional materials recruiting women, they proclaimed, “...when jihad becomes an obligation, then the woman is summoned like a man, and need not ask personal permission from her husband nor from her guardian because she is..."
obligated.”\textsuperscript{2} The willingness of the organization to allow women to take on such violent roles and to imply that they have the same obligation as men do to the movement symbolizes the growing threat and strength of these organizations and the need to analyze the actions of these female bombers rather than sympathize and sensationalize their stories.

Although women have received such a prominent stage in the media both domestically and abroad, further examination reveals that despite their high profile, women play a marginal role in their organizations. Even in areas such as Turkey, where they comprise around 40 percent of all suicide bombers, they still have very limited roles within their respective groups. Despite their highly visible roles, they are very seldom, if ever, the leaders in their organizations, but are used rather strategically because of the aftermath of their attacks. They are not responsible for the planning of the operations and are actually dispatched to the missions with barely a say as to their targets, the timing of the bombing, and the way the operation should be conducted. For the most part they have not otherwise been trained as fighters.

A suicide mission in itself requires little investment in job training, in terms of either time or money. Despite controversy over whether or not women should be allowed to be in combat roles in these highly traditional societies, the fact remains that women are often more efficient attackers. Women typically arouse less suspicion and are better able to clear checkpoints and other security obstacles. In addition, they do not have to undergo special training or possess specialized combat skills, and therefore they offer an efficient use of human resources.³

A female bomber’s ability to attract greater media attention than a male bomber is an asset in and of itself to the organization that has sent her. The organization and its particular cause or grievances will almost automatically benefit from greater exposure, which in large measure is an immediate aim of the bombing itself. In turn, morale and enthusiasm among terrorist organizations are heightened and they are allowed more access to potential bombing locations. A Fatah operative illustrated these parameters when he dispatched two female suicide bombers. He stated that he eventually sent one

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of them on her mission after rejecting her request several times previously, because it was nearly impossible to have a man bypass security arrangements. Not only did the women arouse the usual excessive media attention, but he noted that there was even a katsida, a traditional Islamic ballad, written by a Saudi prince in their honor.⁴

Although their has been funding allocated to address these new terrorist measures, Atran states that while, “there is scant evidence of serious effort or funding to understand why individuals become, or to prevent individuals from becoming terrorists in the first place.”⁵ If there is not a conscious effort to learn more about the origin of these bombing, it is projected that female attacks will continue to be successful. Debra Zedalis suspects that future bombings will include women in strategic positions and use girls and other pregnant women. Zedalis also referenced a growing trend in suicide attacks, the use and recruitment of European women who marry Muslim men. The Times noted that, “Al Qaeda recently appealed for white converts to become suicide bombers because it was easier for them to travel and evade

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Scott Atran, “Mishandling Suicide Terrorism,” The Washington Qaurterly, 27, Summer 2004, 16
Western women have the tactical advantage of blending in and can be an effective tool. The threat of female bombers in many ways is much greater than that of a male bomber, precisely because of the galvanizing and shocking effect that their acts have on communities both domestic and international.

International Media

Media outlets abroad are challenged by several of the same assumptions and stereotypes seen in the presentation of female combatants by the American media. Israeli media is largely plagued by the same tendency to sympathize with the very terrorists who have been responsible for violent attacks in their cities. The same helpless victim and damaged goods archetypes seen in American media, are illustrated in the story of Rasha, a Palestinian woman who planned to commit a suicide terrorist attack and was arrested, her story was published in a prominent Israeli magazine, Yediot Ahronot in November 2004:

When she was born, her father, Khaled, was no longer near her. He left her mother, Mariam, when she was pregnant. Several months after the birth, Rasha’s mother married another man, and gave birth to two sons—

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Rasha’s younger brothers. Since she was born, her father, Khaled, has lived close to them in the camp, but he kept away from them. He was geographically close, but they were very far from his heart. All during her childhood and teenage years, Rasha tried to get close to him, but he avoided her. He even ordered his young children from his new wife to stay away from his beautiful daughter, Rasha.

He broke her heart very, very badly, her mother repeated to me. “Not only did he keep away from her and not recognize her; he also caused her terrible problems, because young men attracted by her beauty stayed away from her. With us, when a man looks for a girl, he wants to be introduced to her parents. Her family history is no less important than her looks. Rasha had a difficult family history. There was no father to whom she could present a prospective groom. She was a wonderful daughter, a good student, and the backbone of the household,” her mother said, and broke into tears. “She did everything to attract his attention. When he drew away from her, he marked her as damaged, and she became depressed. She, who was once so active and full of life and helped me with everything, stopped eating, and sat alone in her room. She was attracted to wanted terrorists,” her mother told me. Perhaps because she had no father, she was swept away by strong men. Perhaps she identified with people who were being hunted, whose lives were in danger.

The reporter pays particular attention to portraying the woman as a victim to all of her adverse circumstances. There are several references to the men in her life who had somehow derailed her life plans. The way the reporter perceives the status of Muslim women plays a key role in the compulsive attention paid to the personal family circumstances that brought this woman to attempt a suicide attack. These biases are evident in news outlets portrayal of
female combatants both domestically and abroad. In contrast, several Arab media outlets have praised these acts as heroic but also used their stories to mobilize potential male terrorists. Taking part in terrorist attacks and warfare is considered especially unusual for women; however it is something that is very real and growing threat particularly in fanatic Islamist organizations.”

American Media

It is the responsibility of the media to construct images of people, events and settings that accurately portray the subject. This is particularly important for subjects that are not in close proximity to the viewer, researcher, or presenter of information. Media misrepresentations of people or communities that are unfamiliar often lead to a narrow and misleading portrayal of social and cultural “others.” American media is plagued by the instant gratification and rapid consumerism of this era. The Internet and satellite technology have transformed news as it was once known. No longer does one have to wait for the paper for the dissemination of information; it takes only a click of the mouse or remote to receive news from around the

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7 Ibid.

8 Said, *Covering Islam*, 120.
globe. While this influx of technology has positively changed the global community it is not without adverse effects. Newsrooms and papers are restricted by strict deadlines and competition and often do not have the requisite time to research all angles.

News reports and stories rely on catchy sound bites and headlines that often reinforce sensationalism and superficiality. Symbols are frequently used to provide convenient, shorthand labels and representations of more intricate matters. The time constraints on television make such shorthand approaches useful and the audiovisual, narrative format lends itself to catchy phrases and headlines such as “Army of Roses,” “Muslim Rage” and “Islamic Peril.”

Television news in particular relies heavily on images that contain action, and exciting visual stimuli. It relies on rapid editing as well as clever sound bites and simplified quotations to capture the short attention span of audiences. This method of information sharing often makes it challenging to present the intricacies of news stories. Thus, pictures of Muslim women in Western clothes and makeup or in full combat regalia and hijab are newsworthy and shocking. Television programs’ main systematic effect on

9 Zedalis, “Female Suicide Bombers,” 43.
human thinking and comprehension is that of simplification.\textsuperscript{10} Television leaves little room for abstraction, ambiguity and reasoning and is biased towards quick, knee-jerk emotional responses. Television news is often accused of trivializing and oversimplifying complex issues into broadly sketched stereotyped conflicts, often causing adverse effects.

By definition, a news report is a compilation of bits of information, processed and structured for delivery to a large audience. Stories are more likely to be reported and shown if they have stimulating eye catching visual stimuli and content. Violence is an easy way to grab attention and interest. There is growing evidence that many people get most of their information from television news. In a recent study, respondents indicated that television is their primary source of news, as well as the one they are most likely to believe.\textsuperscript{11} It is the central public information source for American people and thus incredibly important in its portrayal of female combatants.

With any product, the seller tailors their product to their particular buyer or audience. In this case, the buyer is the American public, and media


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
outlets must meet their bottom line by producing stories that resonate with their viewers. Does the American public really want to see a woman vilified and portrayed as a killer? Whether she is a suicide bomber or a suburban Mom, the truth remains that the American public may not be equipped to see women in roles outside of the traditional norm, particularly women within societies, cultures and religions that are believed to maintain traditional gender hierarchies. One American journalist described the atmosphere surrounding reporting female suicide attacks a celebrity story, the story was “bigger than the OJ Simpson case.” He described terrorism reporting as a drama full of theatrics.

Increasingly, terrorism has been performed for a television audience around the world. Television news should try to cover international news as thoroughly as possible in its limited time frame, it should give in-depth coverage and not rely on stereotypes and provocative pictures. Reporters should disperse their attention throughout the regions of the world, rather than featuring only a few spots and should periodically present stories about every

day political and social life in various countries, rather than only running crisis stories. Reporters should try earnestly to take a critical view of the terrorists’ actions committed by both men and women instead of focusing on conflicts and violence out of context.

Media Contagion

There is a symbiotic relationship between terrorists and the media, publicity can encourage suicide bombing because it still gives bombers precisely what they want – media attention. This is not to say that the media can in any way cause suicide terrorism, however the idea that mass media coverage can precipitate the spread of a certain kind of behavior is known as media contagion.\textsuperscript{13} The media’s influence is derived from its role in “informational gate-keeping and agenda-setting.”\textsuperscript{14} The role of the media in terrorism is politically controversial and much debated. Gould, Jameson and Romer, using an analysis of correlations between media portrayals of violence and violent crime rates, found a measurable link between media publicity

\textsuperscript{13} M.Gould, P. Jameson & D. Romer, “Media Contagion and Suicide Among The Young,” \textit{American Behavioral Scientist} 46, 1269–1284.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
devoted to terrorism and the number of terrorist attacks.\textsuperscript{15} This correlation was particularly evident in high-profile suicide stories.

Media publicity is an overt goal of suicide bombing, the primary targets of suicide-bombing attacks are not those who are injured but those who are made to witness the violence through personal experience or further media coverage.\textsuperscript{16} Female suicide bombers typically kill less than ten people on average in their attacks.\textsuperscript{17} In terms of terrorist acts, this is a relatively small number. Given that suicide bombing is a form of violent coercion that uses symbolic targets, surprise and resulting media publicity to compensate for relative weakness in destructive power, media coverage is an important metric of success. If media amplification is a goal and a measure of victory for suicide bombing, then it is logical that extensive media coverage may encourage groups to continue employing female suicide bombing tactics.

There is no evidence to suggest that media reporting could ever play any more than a small superficial, precipitating role in the spread of suicide

\textsuperscript{15} Phillips, 1983

\textsuperscript{16} Atran, \textit{Genesis of Suicide Terrorism}, 752.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
bombed; it is certainly not an underlying cause, however the media is one part of the overall context of suicide bombing that can be immediately addressed. The media is a window into suicide bombing that can distort and sensationalize, and in doing so possibly precipitate and glorify the spread of such attacks. Specifically, media practitioners should establish a general set of media guidelines for reporting female suicide bombing along with other terrorist acts.

The reality remains that there are violent Muslim men and women who are fanatic about a wide range of causes, just as there are violent Christian men and women. The purpose of this paper is in no way to deny that existence. However, it is imperative that the media present these acts in a way that is truthful and productive. Recommendations for improved coverage of suicide terrorism committed by Muslim female combatants are as follows: do not engage in extensive or repetitive reporting of suicide bombing, do not use sensational headlines that focus on the event as a suicide bombing, do not present simplistic explanations for suicide bombing, do not provide “how-to” descriptions for suicide bombing, do not present it as a tool for accomplishing certain ends, do not glorify suicide bombing or suicide bombers and do not
focus on the suicide bombers' positive characteristics. These recommendations will serve to help limit the contributing role of the media in promoting these violent attacks and allow for the American public to have a greater understanding of these actions and actors abroad.
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