

need to approach the Orakzai campaign in a more “intelligence informed manner,” concentrating on breaking the Taliban from within. There are chances for success in this approach, as during the past two years there have been a number of occurrences where Taliban factions have fought each other over disputes in Orakzai.

In August 2009, for example, 21 militants were killed when two Taliban groups clashed for control of the Akakhel area of upper Orakzai.³⁰ In April 2010, more clashes were reported, when six Taliban, including a local commander, were killed in Orakzai during infighting between two rival Taliban factions led by Mullah Toofan and Mullah Rafiq.³¹ There were also reports of a Taliban commander who defected to his Ali Khel tribe over the Taliban’s poor treatment of Shi`a in Orakzai.³² Although the senior Taliban leadership was able to prevent these infighting incidents from spreading, it does show that there are possible rifts that can be exploited with a more nuanced understanding of the Taliban factions operating in Orakzai.

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The Growing Threat of Female Suicide Attacks in Western Countries

By Houriya Ahmed

IN JANUARY 2010, U.S. intelligence officials warned that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—the Yemen-based group responsible for the attempted Christmas Day airline bombing in the United States—is training female suicide bombers to attack countries in the West.¹ In May 2010, AQAP itself issued a call to Muslim women to join the jihad movement in Yemen.² U.S. officials reportedly believe that these women may have a “non-Arab” appearance and have Western passports, making it easier for them to evade detection while traveling.³

There are growing concerns that al-Qa`ida will start deploying women in its global fight against Western states and their interests. The group is clearly reaching out to Muslim women and asking them to participate in its “struggle” against the West. This year, for example, female suicide bombers have already attacked in Russia, Iraq and Afghanistan. Belgium convicted one woman of leading a terrorist group, while Muslim convert Colleen LaRose is currently facing trial in the United States for wanting to fight violent jihad.⁴ These signs, combined with the ongoing concern of homegrown militants, make it increasingly likely that the United States or Western European countries will experience their first female suicide bombing in the future.

This article provides background on Muslim female participation in violent extremism, shows how certain clerics have encouraged female participation in jihad, and finally examines how al-Qa`ida may adapt its strategy to make use of this tactic.

Female Participation in Violent Extremism

Hizb Allah, the Shi`a Islamist group based in Lebanon, first introduced suicide terrorism in 1983.⁵ Although it was the first religiously motivated party to use this tactic of warfare, secular nationalist groups popularized female suicide bombings in 1985 on behalf of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.⁶ Indeed, according to one 2009 study, 85% of female suicide attacks have been carried out by secular organizations.⁷

By 2004, however, the Palestinian group Hamas employed a female suicide bomber—Reem al-Rayashi.⁸ Since that attack, the tactic has been emulated by a number of militant Islamist groups waging jihad, especially in Iraq. Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, the deceased leader of al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI), claimed responsibility for the group’s first female suicide bomber in September 2005.⁹ By November of that year, AQI claimed responsibility for an additional five female suicide attacks, which included one Iraqi-born woman, Sajida Mubarak al-Rishawi, whose bomb failed

5 Cindy D. Ness, “In the Name of a Cause: Women’s Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism,” in Cindy D. Ness ed., *Female Terrorism & Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organisation* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 18.

6 Lindsey A. O’Rourke, “What’s Special about Female Suicide Terrorism?” *Security Studies* 18:4 (2009). Other examples of secular militant groups that used female suicide bombers include the Kurdistan Workers’ Party in Turkey, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka and the Palestinian al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.

7 Ibid. O’Rourke also states that female suicide bombers have detonated from approximately eight times in the 1980s to more than 100 since 2000. For details on that claim, see p. 696.

8 The militant Islamist group Palestinian Islamic Jihad also started using female suicide bombers. Hamas and Islamic Jihad are not the first Palestinian groups to have embraced female terrorism. Fatah’s militant al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (a nationalist group) was the first to introduce female suicide bombings against Israeli targets with Wafa Idris in January 2002. For more information see O’Rourke, pp. 697-698.

9 Little is known about AQI’s first female suicide bomber. See Christopher Dickey, “Women of Al Qaeda,” *Newsweek*, December 12, 2005.

1 A May 2010 magazine published by AQAP, *Sada al-Malahim*, includes an article by the wife of AQAP’s second-in-command, Said al-Shihri, calling on women to join the jihad in Yemen.

2 Ibid.

3 Phil Sherwell and Sean Rayment, “Al-Qaeda Has Trained Female Suicide Bombers to Attack the West, US Officials Warn,” *Daily Telegraph*, January 23, 2010; Anthony Browne, “Western White Woman a Suicide Bomber,” *The Times*, December 1, 2005.

4 “Belgium Convicts Terror Suspects,” BBC, May 10, 2010; “Muslim Convert Colleen LaRose, aka Jihad Jane, Faces Terror Charges,” *Guardian*, March 10, 2010.

30 “Hakeemullah’s Followers in Orakzai Clash; 21 Killed,” *Dawn*, August 12, 2009.

31 “Taliban Infighting Claims Six Lives in Orakzai,” *Daily Times*, April 2, 2010.

32 Taj.

to detonate when she executed a cross-border attack in Amman, Jordan.¹⁰ Since then, Iraq has seen a number of female suicide bombers, as recently as July 2010.¹¹

Afghanistan and Pakistan have also witnessed female suicide bombers.¹² Afghanistan nearly saw its first in December 2007: the woman, who claimed she was from Pakistan, was arrested before attempting the suicide attack.¹³ By May 2008, however, the Afghan Taliban reportedly claimed responsibility for a successful female suicide attack.¹⁴ Pakistan also saw its first female suicide attack in December 2007, and in January 2010 two teenage girls claimed that they decided to become suicide bombers after hearing speeches from a leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Maulana Fazlullah, but later changed their minds.¹⁵ Security officials in Pakistan are concerned that the Pakistani Taliban may have recruited “hundreds” of female students from Islamabad’s Red Mosque (*Lal Masjid*), a hotbed of Pakistani radicalism.¹⁶

The United States and Western Europe have yet to suffer a female suicide attack. Women have, however, remained on the peripheries of major terrorism plots or acted as propagandists for al-Qa`ida’s global narrative. In Belgium, Malika el-Aroud was convicted and sentenced in May 2010 to eight years in prison for “leading a terrorist group linked with al-Qaeda,” which recruited people in France and Belgium and sent them to Afghanistan for fighting.¹⁷

10 Ibid. Also see “Jordan Shows ‘Would-Be Bomber,’” BBC, November 13, 2005.

11 “Suicide Bomber in Government HQ in West Iraq Kills 3,” Reuters, July 4, 2010.

12 O’Rourke.

13 “Afghans Detain Woman with Bomb Under Burqa,” Reuters, December 24, 2007.

14 “Female Suicide Bomber Kills 15 at Crowded Afghan Market,” Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, May 15, 2008.

15 Sze Leng Chan, “Pakistan’s First Female Suicide Bomber Killed Near Christian School,” *Christian Post*, December 5, 2007; “Swat: 2 Suicide-Bomb Girls Presented Before Media,” Geo TV, January 9, 2010.

16 For details, see Jeremy Page and Zahid Hussain, “Female Suicide Bomber Joins Pakistan Violence,” *The Times*, October 17, 2009.

17 “Belgium Convicts Terror Suspects,” BBC, May 10, 2010.

In the United Kingdom, where a total of five women were convicted for Islamism-related offenses, three acted as protectors for their respective fiancé, husband or brother-in-law in the July 21, 2005 failed suicide attacks in London, of which one described her husband as a “martyr.”¹⁸ Of the other two, one was convicted of distributing a terrorist publication that encouraged

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others to conduct jihad abroad; the other, Houria Chentouf, was convicted for attempting to smuggle a USB stick into the United Kingdom containing files that may have been useful for terrorists.¹⁹ Chentouf was discovered with hand-written notes that indicated she was considering making herself and her children “bombs for the sake of this religion” for they seek “revenge.”²⁰

Where Western women have participated in combat activities, they are known to have done so outside of Western countries. In November 2005, Europe saw its first suicide bomber in Iraq, when Muriel Degauque, a white Belgian convert aged 38, detonated explosives in Baghdad on behalf of

18 The three women are Yeshiemebet Girma, Mulumebet Girma and Fardosa Abdullahi. Police found a note in the Muslim convert Yeshiemebet Girma’s handwriting that described her husband, Hussain Osman, as a “martyr.” See “Wife of 21 July Plotter Convicted,” BBC, June 11, 2008; “21 July Plotter’s Fiancee Jailed,” BBC, July 11, 2008.

19 “Woman Produced ‘Holy War’ Leaflet,” BBC, February 3, 2009; Russell Jenkins, “Mother of Six Houria Chentouf Hid Terror Manual in Burka,” *The Times*, November 3, 2009.

20 Ibid.

AQI.²¹ Reports suggest that Degauque was one of many female Muslim converts in Europe to have been targeted for recruitment to carry out suicide attacks in Iraq and Pakistan.²² In January 2010, the *Sunday Times* reported that a British-Somali female medical student traveled to Somalia to help the al-Qa`ida-linked al-Shabab group.²³

The motivations for females to participate in violent jihad are not categorically known, but some suggest that women fight out of a sense of revenge—particularly Chechen “Black Widows”—and to protect their male counterparts or country.²⁴ For example, Hawa Barayev, the first Chechen female suicide bomber, committed the act in 2000 to not only aid Chechnya’s independence but to set an example for men to follow.²⁵ Comparatively, some Palestinian suicide bombers are thought to have fought to regain a sense of honor, as seen in the case of Reem al-Rayashi.²⁶ Yet examples such as Colleen LaRose, who as “JihadJane” cited religious reasons to fight jihad, can lead to the conclusion that women, just like men, can participate in jihad for ideological reasons.

21 Karla Cunningham, “The Evolving Participation of Muslim Women in Palestine, Chechnya, and the Global Jihadi Movement,” in Ness, p. 95. Cunningham states that Degauque was “tasked by al-Zarqawi.” Also see “Journey of Belgian Female ‘Bomber,’” BBC, December 2, 2005.

22 Cunningham, p. 95.

23 Richard Kerbaj, “UK Students Recruited for Somali Jihad,” *Sunday Times*, January 24, 2010.

24 Farhana Ali, “Dressed to Kill: Why the Number of Female Suicide Bombers is Rising in Iraq,” *Newsweek*, July 30, 2008. “Black Widows” is a reference to Chechen women who have committed suicide out of revenge for losing their brothers, husbands or sons in the war against Russia.

25 Ness, p. 19.

26 Ibid., p. 28. Reem al-Rayashi was thought to have been involved in an extramarital affair. It is argued that her motivation may have been to regain a sense of honor. Similarly, Samira Jassim in Iraq allegedly confessed to organizing the rape of potential female suicide bombers to later convince them that becoming a suicide bomber was their only escape from “shame.” See Deborah Haynes, “Female Suicide Bomb Recruiter’ Samira Ahmed Jassim Captured,” *The Times*, February 3, 2009.

Legitimizing Female Suicide Terrorism

Militant Islamist groups are increasingly adopting female suicide terrorism because it serves their ideological goals and is highly effective. Women are generally subject to more relaxed security checks and attract less suspicion, and their attacks garner greater media coverage; female suicide bombings have more shock value because women are considered less likely to commit acts of mass violence.²⁷ Moreover, the increasing willingness of militant Islamist groups to use female suicide bombers reflects shifts in attitudes. Female terrorism has gained intellectual legitimacy, and this tactic of warfare has received scholarly, albeit Islamist, backing.²⁸

Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of Sunni Islam's preeminent clerics, has justified the use of female suicide terrorism against perceived "occupying" powers, such as Israel. He issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) that states: "...committed Muslim women in Palestine have the right to participate and have their own role in jihad and to attain martyrdom."²⁹ He also said that women can embark on a "martyrdom" operation "without a *mahram* (male guardian, a husband or male relative they cannot marry)."³⁰ Al-Qaradawi's *fatwa* makes it permissible for women to fight alongside men when jihad becomes *fard `ayn*—an individual duty during times of war that requires all men and women to participate—and they can do so without the permission or accompaniment of a male guardian.³¹

Hamas, inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, provides the best example of this shift, with its spiritual leader, Shaykh Yassin, claiming at the start of the second intifada: "Men are more efficient because they are better at hiding out with the bomb...They are

stronger psychologically than women, who might not be able to stay hidden and alone."³² Hamas changed tact in 2004, however, when Reem al-Rayashi, a mother of two, believed she would attain martyrdom and become one of the 70 *houris* (nymphs) promised to male suicide bombers.³³ Shaykh Yassin explained why the group used a woman for the first time:

For the first time, Hamas used a female fighter and not a male fighter. It is a new development in resistance against the enemy... Resistance will escalate against this enemy until they leave our land and homeland.³⁴

Despite Yassin's statement, Hamas did not deploy its second female suicide bomber until November 2006 with Fatima Omar Mahmud al-Najar, showing that Hamas has not yet adopted these bombings as a regular tactic.³⁵

A similar intellectual shift may be occurring in al-Qa`ida. Usama bin Ladin's 1996 *Declaration of War Against the Americans* indicated that women should only play a supportive role in the fight against the West. He instructed women to "instigate their brothers to fight in the cause of Allah" and glorified women who did so. By the early 2000s, however, al-Qa`ida moved toward legitimizing female participation in

jihad. Yusuf al-`Uyayri, al-Qa`ida's leader in Saudi Arabia who was killed in 2003, issued a pamphlet, *The Role of Women in Jihad Against the Enemies*, aimed at women that implicitly encouraged them to participate.³⁶ He lionized women in early Islamic history who fought jihad and stated that they should be role models for women today. Al-`Uyayri went further to dismantle traditional religious arguments that require permission for women to fight: "But if the Jihad becomes an individual obligation (*fard `ayn*), then no permission is needed."³⁷ He argued that the jihad al-Qa`ida is currently confronting is *fard `ayn*: "And in our time jihad is an individual obligation."³⁸ This jihad, according to al-`Uyayri, applies equally to both men and women, and that the latter do not require the permission from a male guardian to fight.³⁹ Al-`Uyayri provided the religious and intellectual justification for female jihad, although fell short of explicitly sanctioning it by stating that women should instead support their men.⁴⁰ By 2004, al-Qa`ida launched the first online jihadist magazine aimed specifically at women, *al-Khansaa*.⁴¹

By December 2009, sympathetic jihadist forums posted a letter by Ayman al-Zawahiri's wife, Umaymah Hasan, titled

36 The exact publication date of the pamphlet is unknown, as the English translation published by at-Tibyan Publications makes no mention of it. Al-`Uyayri, however, mentioned in the pamphlet Hawa Barayev, who committed suicide in 2000, and al-`Uyayri was killed in 2003. This pamphlet can therefore be dated to sometime between 2000-2003. An English version of the pamphlet is available at www.islamfuture.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/the-role-of-the-women-in-fighting-the-enemies.pdf.

37 For details, see al-`Uyayri's pamphlet. For legitimization, al-`Uyayri cited the classical scholar al-Qurtubi who wrote: "There may be a situation where it is obligatory for everyone to go out, and that is if jihad becomes an individual obligation...The one who has a father [i.e. *mahram*] can go without his permission, as well as the one without a father." Al-`Uyayri also cited another classical scholar, Ibn Qudamah, who argued the same.

38 Ibid.

39 For further analysis of al-`Uyayri's pamphlet, see David Cook, "Women Fighting in Jihad?" in Ness.

40 Ibid., p. 46.

41 The magazine is named after a famous Arab poetess who wrote eulogies in early Islamic history about her male relatives fighting in jihad. Articles in the magazine advised women on how to support jihad. See Sebastian Usher, "Jihad' Magazine for Women on Web," BBC, August 24, 2004.

27 O'Rourke; Debra Zedalis, "Beyond the Bombings: Analysing Female Suicide Bombings," in Ness.

28 Cunningham, p. 93.

29 The exact date of al-Qaradawi's *fatwa* is unknown. It is referenced, however, in a question and answer discussion dated November 6, 2006 on the Islamic religious website IslamOnline.net.

30 Ibid.

31 This is different from *fard kifaya* (collective duty), where the duty applies to the Muslim community collectively, but means that not every Muslim has to perform an act such as jihad as long as a sufficient number of community members fulfill the duty.

32 O'Rourke, p. 696.

33 Hala Jaber and Uzi Mahnaimi, "Husband Took Wife to Suicide Bombing," *Sunday Times*, January 18, 2004. In a video, al-Rayashi reportedly said, "I want to be the first woman to carry out a martyr attack." For details, see Margot Dudkevitch, "Suicide Attack at Erez Crossing Kills Four," *Jerusalem Post*, January 14, 2004.

34 Dudkevitch.

35 Steven Erlanger, "Grandmother Blows Self Up in Suicide Attack on Israeli Forces," *New York Times*, November 24, 2006. Al-Najar is the last known female suicide bomber claimed by Hamas. According to one study, Palestinian suicide bombings have been in decline since 2005. See Yoram Schweitzer, "Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Virtuous Heroines or Damaged Goods?" in Ness, p. 131. Another study claims that this decline is a result of effective Israeli counterterrorism measures. See Hillel Frisch, "Motivation or Capabilities? Israeli Counterterrorism Against Palestinian Suicide Bombings and Violence," The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, December 2006. A 2008 BBC report, however, states that Palestinian Islamic Jihad is training women as suicide bombers. See "Just Married and Determined to Die," BBC, October 13, 2008.

“[A Letter] to the Muslim Sisters.”⁴² The letter stated that women should follow in the footsteps of those who “martyred” themselves in Palestine, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq. For the first time, women are openly called upon by al-Qa`ida to participate in its jihad against the West, which is made permissible by the group because jihad is considered *fard`ayn*. The letter described “martyrdom” as an aspiration, and the author asked for women to aid Islam by fighting alongside men.⁴³ Women should also encourage each other, the letter stated, to “not abstain from this religious obligation.”⁴⁴ Differing from al-`Uyayri and al-Qaradawi, however, the letter said that women should have a male guardian during combat activities: “Jihad is *fard`ayn* on every Muslim man and woman, but the way of fighting is not easy for Muslim women for it requires a *mabram*.” The letter continued to say, however, that

we should aid our religion in several ways and should keep our selves in the service of the Mujahideen, and we should fulfill whatever they ask of us, may it be through monetary aid to them...or participation in fighting or even through a martyrdom operation.

This apparent discrepancy over male guardians is perhaps an attempt to appease more conservative followers of al-Qa`ida.

Al-Qa`ida's Strategy

The case of Colleen LaRose parallels what al-Qa`ida may be hoping to achieve in the West: an increase of “homegrown” sympathizers among Western women who are able to provide logistical and operational support. A white convert and U.S. citizen, LaRose is alleged to have recruited men to wage

⁴² Al-Qa`ida's publishing house al-Sahab originally issued this letter in Arabic and it appeared on jihadist websites on December 17, 2009. For details, see “Wife of Al-Qa`idah's Al-Zawahiri Urges Muslim Women to Support Mujahidin,” BBC, December 17, 2009. The letter was translated into English by Dar al-Murabtieen Publications and was posted on the militant website Ansar al-Mujahideen. All quotes from the letter are taken from the English translation of the letter uploaded on Ansar. The PDF file, however, is no longer accessible.

⁴³ The letter states: “...the Muslim women should work beside men to defend her religion and land.”

⁴⁴ Ibid.

violent jihad in South Asia and Europe, and women who had the ability to travel into Europe in support of jihad.⁴⁵ She is accused of agreeing to kill a Swedish resident and using the internet to solicit funds for terrorists.⁴⁶ In an online YouTube forum, she posted comments as “JihadJane” stating her desire to become a “martyr in the name of Allah” and that her appearance would allow her to “blend in with many people.”⁴⁷ She is also accused of traveling to Europe in August 2009 with the intent to live and train with jihadists.⁴⁸

LaRose's alleged attempts to radicalize others online are not uncommon. Houria Chentouf is believed to have been radicalized online by visiting jihadist forums. Similarly, Nicky Reilly, a 22-year-old man convicted in 2008 of attempting to commit a suicide attack in the United Kingdom that same year, is also believed to have been radicalized online by two men with alleged links to al-Qa`ida living in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.⁴⁹ In fact, posts encouraging women to participate in jihad are increasing on militant Islamist forums, including English-language ones such as Ansar al-Mujahideen and al-Qimmah.⁵⁰ This indicates that women from English-speaking countries, such

⁴⁵ *U.S.A. v. Colleen R. LaRose*, Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 2010.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. There have been training camps in the United Kingdom, which members of the July 21, 2005 cell attended. These camps were run by Mohammed Hamid and Atilla Ahmet. Hamid was convicted in 2008 of soliciting to murder and providing terrorist training, and Ahmet in 2007 of soliciting to murder. See “Top Extremist Recruiter is Jailed,” BBC, March 7, 2008.

⁴⁹ Duncan Gardham, “Al-Qaeda's Terrorists who Brainwashed Exeter Suicide Bomber Still on the Run,” *Daily Telegraph*, October 15, 2008.

⁵⁰ A May 2, 2010 post included a video of a female fighter in the Ogaden region in Ethiopia. Forum members praised the woman for her bravery. For details, see www.ansar1.info/showthread.php?p=75107#post75107. A January 29, 2010 post asked women to follow the example of al-Khansaa and support jihad. For details, see www.alqimmah.net/showthread.php?t=13736. A February 2010 post detailed how a woman should support her husband's jihad. For details, see www.alqimmah.net/showthread.php?t=13736. An August 2009 post included a letter intended for Muslim women praising them for their virtues and dignity in the jihad cause and “martyrdom...at the hands of a *kafir* [non-believer].” For details, see www.ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=16807.

as the United Kingdom and the United States, are targeted for recruitment. Moreover, the fact that Reilly, along with Degauque and LaRose, is also a white convert to Islam worryingly suggests that converts, often in search of a new identity, are easy prey for al-Qa`ida or at least its violent ideology. It is suspected that the group may want to groom the next generation of operatives by targeting women with the ability to move freely and without suspicion in Western countries. Nevertheless, the extent to which women are actually targeted by al-Qa`ida's central leadership to become suicide bombers is still unclear.

Conclusion

The fact that Ayman al-Zawahiri's wife issued a call to women to participate in jihad and “martyr” themselves suggests that al-Qa`ida may change tactics and follow in the footsteps of groups such as Hamas or its own Iraqi affiliate, AQI. If so, female converts who have the advantage of blending in and possibly evading security measures would be a likely target. The internet has no doubt become an efficient way to propagandize and win over recruits worldwide. It is no coincidence that there has been a recent increase of posts on jihadist forums that eulogize and call on women to participate in jihad and “martyrdom operations.”

The legitimization of female terrorism as an individual duty by militant Islamist groups shows that they believe Muslims are facing a growing existential threat from the West and “occupying” powers. Hamas is fighting on behalf of Palestinians against Israel, making its attacks specific to one territory. Al-Qa`ida, on the other hand, is currently fighting its jihad to target those it perceives as posing a threat to Islam or Muslims worldwide. If group tactics are copied, it may be only a matter of time before the United States and Western European countries are attacked by a female suicide bomber.

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