

The psychological phenomenon of female suicidal terrorism

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Abstract: The article considers the problem of female suicidal terrorism. The terminological definition, history of origin and modern interpretation of the concept of “shahid” are given. Historical facts about the usage of people as “human bombs” in political confrontation demonstrated. The typological features of potential female suicide bombers are presented. The main factors motivating women to commit a suicidal terrorist act are considered.

Keywords: terrorist act, religious extremism, suicide bomber, shahid, Sharia, “human bomb”, suicidal terrorist act, manipulation, self-detonation, shahidism, gender asymmetry, transformation of consciousness.

Introduction Religious conflicts in all historical periods have led to tragic consequences, a huge number of victims, including not only the participants of these clashes, but people who, by coincidence, were at the place of the tragedy. Religious and interethnic hostility, phobias on a confessional and national basis, the death of beloved ones, social panic, material losses, the irretrievable forfeiture of historical values - this is not a complete list of what inevitably accompanies terrorist acts.

A specific feature of modern religious extremism in recent decades is that suicide bombers who present themselves as shahids are active participants of terrorist attacks. It is very important to emphasize that the term “shahid”, used in the modern world to refer to the actions of suicidal terrorists, in the Islamic classical tradition does not correspond to this interpretation, since their actions contradict the spirit and foundations of the Sharia from all points of view [1].

Often used in our days interpretation of the term “shahid” distorts the religious meaning, originally embedded in its content. Moreover, this distortion is present both in relation to the biological status of a person, and to his spiritual one.

The fact is that, in accordance with Islamic dogma, the concepts of “shahid” and “suicide bomber” are not synonymous, since from a biological point of view only a person who has already died can be called a shahid. At the same time, in many literary sources and media space the semantics of this concept are often ignored and it is actively used in the context of alive terrorists.

The word “shahid” itself has a Middle Eastern origin. Translated from Arabic, it means “witness” and in a figurative sense - “committed to the goal”. The usage of “shahid” concept correlates with the period of the Medina Ummah campaigns. In particular, in 624 the participants of the Badra battle were called askhab al-Badr and those who died along this way were called shahids, that is to say martyrs for faith died on the way to Allah.

However, the incorrect interpretation of terminology, unfortunately, is the least of troubles. The real problem of modern religious extremism is that more and more often women act as shahids. Statistics shows that terrorist acts involving female suicide bombers are an established practice. That is why this problem is relevant and requires substantial social, political and psychological researches.

Despite the significant scale of the problem, the issues of women's participation in terrorist activities are not well studied. Both in academic researches and in media materials the emphasis is done on the analysis of individual life stories of women, but the study of the main patterns at the group level is practically not carried out. However, gender issues, including the study of motivation and ways of women's recruiting are an equally important aspect of the research.

Historical facts show that the usage of people as "human bombs" in the political confrontation has been practiced before. However, in the 1990s, pro-Islamic religious-extremist groups began to attract young women to participate in suicidal terrorist acts the most actively.

It should be noted that a scientific and theoretical study of the shahidism's gender aspect, its features and causes, as well as development trends in the modern process indicates a transformation of views on the participation of women in suicidal terrorist acts.

The "Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades", "Islamic Jihad" and "Tanzim" were among the first who actively used women as "human bombs". " Hamas" at that time held diametrically opposed points of view regarding the usage of female suicide bombers. The reason was that many Sharia scholars insisted that a woman had no right even to appear on the street without a man's escort, not to mention of taking some actions on her own [2].

In addition, " Hamas" has for quite a long time categorically rejected such methods of terror as being inconsistent with the spirit of Islam, prohibiting suicide. However, in the early 2000s, the leaders of this organization gave official permission to recruit young women and then use them as suicide bombers in view of the fact that the preparation of such a terrorist attack is relatively simple, a woman does not need to be trained in warfare and methods of conspiracy, she acts as a cheap, effective and disposable "weapon".

Since 2015 there are more and more signs that limiting the role of woman in combat actions is gradually losing its relevance. The status of women in religious extremist organizations, including as suicide bombers, continues to change every day. For example, in February 2018, the "Islamic state" released a video of a woman pictured on for the first time the battlefield with male fighters, reflecting a trend largely unique to a terrorist organization that relies on the dogma of Islam.

There are several reasons for the attractiveness of training women as suicide bombers. First, women are less suspicious of security and law enforcement agencies, so it is easier for them to enter any public place. Second, they wear looser and bulkier

clothing that allows them to better hide the bomb. Third, a woman can be pregnant, which has its advantages: security and law enforcement officials are reluctant to detain pregnant women, which allows potential suicide bombers to hide their weapons. Fourth, women respond more easily and actively to motivation and manipulation. It is easier to impress and intimidate them, or force them to avenge their dead husbands, children, brothers, or other relatives.

Ideologists and leaders of religious extremist groups position suicidal terrorism as the “true path” of the shahid, who is promised the highest mercy of Allah after the self-detonation, due to the fact that the suicide bomber gives own life allegedly in His name. However, Tafsir¹ clearly shows the opposite.

In Islam human life is highly valued and security in all aspects of life is given special importance. Harming one’s health and committing suicide is prohibited in Islam. This is confirmed by the following ayats of the Holy Koran, in which the Allah says:

وَلَا تُلْقُوا بِأَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى التَّهْلُكَةِ - البقرة 195

“You do not expose (do not throw) yourself to your death with your own hands”², and

“You do not kill yourself”³.

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ - النساء 29

According to the canons of Islam, suicide, even in the name of a lofty goal, is not a valor, but a terrible sin. A Muslim, who has committed a suicide act, cannot go to Paradise. Suicidal person is buried behind the fence - not in the cemetery, where his relatives are reposing, but more often his burial place is hidden. That is why suicide is alien to the way of life, the spiritual and cultural perception of the faithful Muslim [3].

In addition, the Almighty will in Islam, as in all religious confessions, is recognized as the only, fair and infallible. This postulate means that it is He [Allah] and only He can control human lives and decide who lives and who dies. Breaking this rule means encroaching on the divine will. In this context, religious-extremist ideology is completely contrary to the will of the God, since, killing himself, a suicide bomber takes the lives of strangers who he does not have the right to take.

In general, according to the tenets of Islam, a person can take the life of another person only in three cases:

- if he, as a warrior, fights enemies in open confrontation;
- if the court has legally approved the death penalty;
- if the life of a certain person is in danger.

¹ the science of interpreting and commenting on the ayats of Holy Koran

² Holy Koran, Sura “al-Baqara”, 195th ayat

³ Holy Koran, Sura “An-Nisa”, 29th ayat

It is quite obvious that shahidism in the form of a suicidal terrorist act, in the concept, in which it is used by religious extremist organizations, does not apply to these cases.

Exploring the problem of female shahidism, a number of questions arises. What kind of woman could potentially become a suicide bomber? How does a woman - the bearer of stability, the keeper of the family hearth, called to raise children, take care of husband and relatives - take the path of person's violence and murders? What motivators are capable of so devaluing the innate destiny of giving life that a woman becomes able to take it away?

Analysis of the highlighted problem shows that it is practically impossible to create a single psychological portrait of a woman who can be recruited as a suicide bomber, based only on data on age, place of origin, nationality, marital status. However, statistical studies show that these are mostly girls and young women 16-24 years old. As a rule, they come from among second or third generation of Muslim migrants, although the number of neophytes is also growing. Many of them have good prospects for education and quite successful future life in the West, come from prosperous families with moderate views. A significant number of girls graduated from high school, among them there are students, some are very well educated, able to think independently [4].

There is a stereotype that women are more merciful and compassionate than men and, accordingly, their "fighting spirit" is weaker. For most women the very idea of killing innocent people (including children) is unacceptable. Nevertheless, today's reality convinces us that this is far from always the case. Some representatives of the "female wing" of religious extremist organizations break this gender stereotype. They approve of the brutality of the militants against the "infidels ones", show a tendency to violence, and behave aggressively.

Such behavior is motivated by the fact that women are characterized by increased emotionality, excitability, anxiety, and also, by virtue of the protective mechanisms built into the maternal instinct, they become aggressive faster than men. Many psychologists and psychiatrists come to the conclusion that the cause of female aggression is certain genetic features, and just like female alcoholism, it is difficult to change or treat.

On the other hand, women are much easier to be manipulated, respectively, to use them to commit a suicidal terrorist act. This is explained by increased suggestibility, sensitivity, higher than that of the stronger sex conformity, more persistent affect, often low self-esteem, the presence of psychological complexes and phobias [5].

In the context of the problem it should be mention the religious factor. A feature of suicide bombings is that they are women mostly practicing Islam. A number of researchers consider that the reason for the involvement of Muslim women in terrorist acts, which take the lives of both the performers themselves and the innocent people who become victims, is gender asymmetry in Islam [6].

In terms of gender relations, Islam expresses traditional patriarchal ideas. Starting with the doctrine of the world creation, a secondary role is prescribed to a woman. It

consists mainly in the realization of the biological task - to belong to her husband and reproduce offspring. A woman in Islam, of course, plays an important role as a wife and mother, but at the same time she is positioned as an “emotional and irrational being,” which limits her possibilities to the private sphere and excludes her from the public life.

The procedure for divorce on the initiative of a woman according to Sharia law is almost impossible, although if this process is initiated by a man, everything is much simpler. Equality between a man and a woman is possible only for Allah, while in real practice it is practically absent.

Studies in the socio-psychology of religion show that opinions regarding religious factors that are the basis or motivation of suicide bombers are differed. Some researchers suppose that a woman who was initially raised in the spirit of humility to a man is psychologically ready to obey and execute man’s instructions, up to giving up her life and committing the killing of innocent people.

Other authors interpret female suicidal terrorism as a kind of social protest, guided by a subconscious desire for gender equality. There is a point of view according to which the participation of women in suicidal terrorist acts is determined by the desire to gain their own identity, when, having paid such a price, a woman is able to equal a man in the public sphere. For example, experts at New York University in their study “Interregional trends of female terrorism” consider that in many countries and regions of the planet precisely it is the inability to participate in ordinary forms of political activity pushing women to terrorism.

Another driver for women to commit a suicidal terrorist act is the loss of a significant man, more often a husband or brother. In this case, involvement in illegal activities, the end of which self-detonation is planned, comes down to the manipulation of female despair and helplessness on the part of men who are at the head of a religious extremist organization.

Psychologists explain the success of the recruitment in this example by the socio-psychological factors that influence the future potential candidate for suicide bombing. Having received a severe emotional trauma after the death of a person who was dear to her, a woman sees the meaning of her remaining life only in revenge, thereby becoming the ideal material for processing by the ideologists of a religious extremist organization [7].

To understand what makes girls and women join the ranks of suicide bombers, several motivators are also needed. One of them is the desire “to clear name”. As an example we can point out Iman Askha - mother of two children. She tried to bring five kilograms of explosives into the central bus station in Tel Aviv. The attack was prevented. During the interrogation Iman explained her decision to become a “human bomb” by the fact that her husband was arrested for communication with the Israelis, and she sought to “clear her name and at the same time raise the social status of her children in the future”.

Another incentive is the offense of women against the actions of law enforcement agencies or revenge for friends and relatives. A good illustration is Hiba Daraghmeh, a member of the “Islamic Jihad” group that exploded near a shopping center in Afula (Israel). Four people died as a result of the attack, another fifteen were injured. The reason for the self-detonation was an insult to Israeli soldiers, who demanded that she and her friends-girls take off their headscarves that hid part of their faces. Hiba refused, and the soldiers tore off her headscarf. After this incident, she decided to take revenge by becoming a “human bomb”. Another Palestinian woman, Arin Ahmed, who was detained by Israeli intelligence service and accused of preparing an explosion in Rishon Lezion, during testifying, explained that she wanted to avenge the death of her friend, a “Tanzim” fighter killed by Israeli soldiers.

The next motive that pushes many women on the path of terror is a romantic relationship with men - members of radical organizations. Some scientists note that recently not only increased propaganda of violence, but also the “heroization” of the extremist image has posed a threat [8]. In the most popular social networks “Instagram”, “Twitter”, “VKontakte”, “Facebook”, “Friendica”, terrorists position themselves as strong, courageous, brave, purposeful ones.

These are precisely the qualities that attract the representatives of fairer sex. Moreover, the alluring image of the “Mujahideen hero” impresses not only those who have experienced psychological trauma (betrayal, divorce, death of a loved one), but also on self-sufficient and independent women. Psychologists explain this phenomenon by the fact that inside almost every “iron lady” there is a little girl who is ready to trust a brave, reliable and confident man who promises to solve all problems by substituting a strong shoulder.

Girls and women under the influence of gender needs (to meet “the same”, “single man”) and social attitudes (to create a family, get the status of a married woman), dreaming of a real man-hero, are easily recruited by professional ones who promise them to be realized dreams in real life. Naturally, having entered into such a relationship, women strive to become real “combat sisters”, to carry out any instructions. Studies show that sometimes women’s feelings acquire manic traits, turning into an obsessed love addiction. And then the wording “any instructions” may indicate a suicidal terrorist act.

A fairly common motive for female shahidism is the desire to “atone for all blame before Allah”. It is known that among suicide bombers there are many women who are considered “unclean” in a strict Muslim environment. For example, the Palestinian woman Wafe Idris made a self-detonation because she was suspected of extramarital affairs. It is clear that shameful behavior for the young woman is absolutely unacceptable, since the disgrace in the case of publicity falls on the whole clan. It is this argument that the ideologists of religious extremist groups manipulate, using simple blackmail.

Such a method is clear evidence of anti-human attitude to a women and the use of a double standard policy regarding gender status. From the point of normal human logic, this is an extreme form of discrimination against women who are unable to defend themselves, otherwise prove their innocence. Nevertheless, members of religious extremist groups do not stop there.

Women do not always become “unclean” of their own free will. They can be abducted (sometimes under the guise of marriage), commit a violence (in some cases it may be a group act), shooting what is happening on camera. A woman loses the opportunity to marry or return to her family - “disgraced”, nobody needs her. She doesn’t have a husband who can stand her ground.

There are only two ways out of such a tragic situation, and both, unfortunately, are lethal. In the first case, blackmail is applied to the victim, during which she is informed that the video will be posted on the network and everyone will know about her shame. Accordingly, the only way to “cleanse” and still “reach Paradise” is self- detonation. In the second case, such women have been used for some time as “camping equipment” to satisfy the sexual needs of the militants. No matter how inhuman it may sound, but when the “equipment” becomes “unusable”, the woman is used as a “human bomb”.

At this point, the psyche of the victim is completely broken, personal identity is erased, numerous psychological, moral and physiological injuries provoke a tunnel perception of reality, which leads to the fact that even the self-preservation instinct fades into the background, and the woman is ready and wants to stop this suffering and commit suicide. In what way she will do that - in the described situation for her, brought to the state of a psychological zombie, no longer matters.

It should be emphasized that the religious factor in the form of distorted attitudes and ideas is actively exploited by ideologists of religious extremist groups in the process of preparing women as future suicide bombers. They are promised a “reward” (most often - meetings with loved ones and relatives) after a “heroic” death. After all, their loved ones, of course, are already there - in Paradise, because “they died on the path of Allah”, that is, they have already become martyrs.

Future victims are convinced that their trip to Paradise will be easy, valiant and painless. After such a powerful ideological and psychological processing, the potential suicide bomber begins to sincerely believe that “there [in Paradise] she awaits an unearthly beauty a smell that does not exist on Earth at all. She will meet all the soldiers who died for Allah and become martyrs, and she herself will become a guria - the most beautiful girl who will serve these soldiers, which is the highest honor”.⁴

Thus, the psychological phenomenon of female shahidism consists in the transformation of consciousness to such an extent that the victim perceives the surrounding world as something hostile, deserving not only contempt, but also destruction. Blind faith, fanaticism, intransigence, and immunity to any dissuasion and persuasion are characteristic of the inner world of female suicide bombers.

⁴ from the interview of suicide bomber Zarema Muzhakhoeva
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In this regard, it is necessary to understand that the fight against shahidism should be aimed not so much at detection and neutralizing of “human bombs” as at those who “create” them. Extremist organizations, manipulating the centuries-old traditions of Islam, supporting the dogma of humility to men, involve women in terrorist acts, while using them exclusively for political purposes.

An analysis of the methods of recruiting and training women as suicide bombers clearly shows that the dogma used in the name of “great goals” is pseudo-religious in its nature, and the activity of women themselves comes down to the role of the death sacrifice, which they must make for the “truth” faith.

When applied to the Islamic world, this approach is fundamentally inconsistent with its tenets. The participation of a woman as suicide bomber in a terrorist act does not give her identity and independence doesn't open the gate to Paradise and wash away the shame (often specially provoked) from her honest name. On the contrary, in confessional Islam, the question of a woman's entering the gates of Paradise is resolved without a suicidal terrorist act: “Enter Paradise, you and your wives will be gratified” (another interpretation: “Enter the Paradise joyful along with your wives (together with your own kind)”⁵).

But girls and women - someone's daughters, sisters, wives and mothers - being not sufficiently religiously literate, fall under the influence of a completely different ideology and become suicide bombers.

They are called “shahids”, “black widows”, “brides of Allah”. No matter how “beautiful” and “proud” it sounds from the lips of religious extremist organizations' ideologists, the rest of the civilized world understands that these girls and women, in fact, are only “expendable materials”, an impersonal means to achieve some political and sometimes just mercantile goals. Whether the price for breaking gender stereotypes is adequate? This question still remains open.

⁵ Holy Koran, Sura “Az-Zukhruf”, 70th ayat
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