

What's Special about Female Suicide Terrorism?

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This study analyzes the interaction between the motivations of individual attackers and terrorist group strategies. To do so, I combine a quantitative analysis of all known suicide terrorist attacks between 1981 and July 2008 with a strategic account of why terrorist organizations employ female suicide terrorism (FST) and case studies of individual female attackers. I advance five central claims. First, I reveal the superior effectiveness of FST from the perspective of the groups that employ women. Second, I explain that terrorist groups increasingly enlist women as suicide attackers because of their higher effectiveness. Third, I demonstrate that terrorist groups adapt their discourse, catering to the specific individual motives of potential female suicide attackers in order to recruit them. Fourth, I show that female attackers are driven by the same general motives and circumstances that drive men. Furthermore, and in contrast to the existing literature, women attackers uphold, rather than eschew, their societies' norms for gender behavior. Attempts to transform these societies into gender-neutral polities are therefore destined to increase FST. Finally, I conclude that, unless target states adapt their defensive strategies, we should expect an increase in FST.

Although men are conventionally viewed as the leaders of armed insurrection, women have increasingly become key strategic assets within the realm of suicide terrorism. The number of female suicide attackers has risen from

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eight during the 1980s to well over one hundred since 2000; women have struck in Afghanistan, India, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Pakistan, Russia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.¹ Moreover, suicide attacks conducted by females are substantially more lethal than those conducted by men. Beyond mere numbers, however, female suicide attacks are considered especially shocking since such actions violate the gender norms of the societies from which the attackers emerge. Given this, female suicide terrorism (FST) has evoked a number of critical questions: What is special about FST? When do terrorist organizations employ women as attackers? Do female attackers offer terrorist organizations any strategic advantage? Do female suicide terrorists embrace or resent societal norms? Despite significant media and scholarly attention, FST has not been the object of a sufficiently comprehensive study, capable of providing conclusive results.

Female suicide attackers do not fit popular conceptions about them. Furthermore, they have yet to receive significant attention within the central debate on the causes of suicide terrorism (ST), which focuses on whether ST is primarily a strategy against military occupation or a result of the cultures from which it emerges. On the one hand, scholars such as Robert Pape and Mohammed Hafez argue that ST is adopted as a coercive strategy to force states to make certain territorial or political concessions, such as removing troops from territory that the terrorists consider their homeland.² On the other hand, scholars such as Daniel Benjamin, Martin Kramer, Mark Sageman, Steven Simon, and Ehud Sprinzak suggest that religious ideology, specifically Islamic fundamentalism with its conception of martyrdom and jihad, is the primary driving force behind ST.³ Although there is disagreement on whether strategy or ideology is the main propelling force behind ST, there seems to be little doubt that it results from one or the other.

Given the growing number of women as suicide attackers, much journalistic attention and a separate academic literature has emerged on FST. Women, we are told, become suicide bombers out of despair, mental illness, religiously mandated subordination to men, and a host of other factors specific to their gender. Indeed, the only thing everyone can agree on is that there is something fundamentally different motivating women and men. By

¹ Although other studies have placed the number of female attackers as high as 225, my number is lower because I do not include failed attacks or those in which the death of the perpetrator was not required for the successful completion of the mission. Medea Group Limited, "Female Suicide Bombers—Practical Implications," *Strategic Security and Analysis* 2, no. 2 (15 August 2007).

² See Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); Mohammed Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

³ See Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Next Attack: The Failure of the War on Terror and the Strategy for Getting it Right* (New York: Times Books, 2005); Martin Kramer, "The Moral Logic of Hizballah," in *Origins of Terrorism*, ed. Walter Reich (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 131–57; Mark Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Ehud Sprinzak, "Rational Fanatics," *Foreign Policy* (September/October 2000): 66–73.

looking exclusively at the individual motives of female attackers, one significant strand of the academic literature suggests that these women resent traditional gender norms in their societies. Invoking feminist arguments as the driving force behind FST, this literature argues that FST is best tackled by transforming these societies into modern polities in which genders are treated equally. Consequently, the literature on FST reinforces the position of those who argue that ideological factors are the primary source of ST in general. This intellectual position leads to policy recommendations oriented toward the modernization and transformation by the west of societies with strong gender-specific norms, if necessary by force.

The greatest weakness of the existing literature is that it fails to explain what is special about female suicide terrorism. In fact, the literature is silent on three major puzzles that arise in relation to FST. First, why is there such a wide variation in the use of women as suicide attackers from one ST campaign to another? Indeed, the percentage of women used in a particular suicide campaign ranges between zero and seventy-five. Second, why are female attackers much more likely to be used by secular organizations compared to religious ones? And third, why does the tactical deployment of attackers as well as the lethality of their attacks vary by gender?

Although I agree that gender is a meaningful category of analysis in the study of ST, I refute the conclusions of previous studies on FST.⁴ In my view, FST—as ST in general—is propelled by strategic considerations. Cultural factors play a subordinate role, reflected in the rhetoric and recruitment tactics of terrorist organizations as well as in the individual motives of female attackers. At the same time, different interactions between strategy and ideology are able to account for the empirical variation in the use of women as suicide terrorists. Given this, one major shortcoming with the extant FST literature is that the focus is on the individual motivations of female attackers. The literature omits both considerations about the effectiveness of FST and the strategic aims of the organizations that use the method. The literature therefore provides no alternatives to the arguments I make regarding the higher lethality of FST attacks (Section 2) and on its organizational dynamics (Section 3). Alternative arguments to the ones I put forth concerning the individual motivation of female attackers are discussed later, in Section 4.

This study is the first to cover the effectiveness and organizational dynamics of FST, revealing several previously unidentified organizational, political, and strategic aspects of FST. My argument offers five central points. First, I demonstrate the superior effectiveness of women suicide attackers from the perspective of the groups that employ them, using empirical data and

⁴ On the distinction between categories of analysis and categories of practice, see Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 1, esp. 15-16.

providing an explanation for the tactical advantage of FST. Second, I explain that terrorist groups increasingly enlist women as suicide attackers because their organizational aim is strategic success. Third, I demonstrate how terrorist groups deploy discourse based upon gender-specific cultural norms for the recruitment of female suicide attackers at the service of the groups' strategic goals. By departing from the bottom-up approach employed by the extant literature on FST, I illustrate that ideology is an interface between the terrorist organizations' strategic motives and the individual motivations of female attackers. Fourth, and against those who claim that female attackers are motivated by uniquely feminine, personal reasons, I argue that the main motives and circumstances that impel female attackers are quite similar to those that drive men—deep commitments to their communities. In some cases, terrorist organizations take advantage of this commitment by promoting norms that encourage women to become suicide attackers so to re-embrace societal norms for gender behavior from which they were perceived as having deviated. Finally, as a result of this misrepresentation of women bombers' motives, the extant literature leads to erroneous policy prescriptions that potentially aggravate ST in general. Rather than outside powers transforming these societies by introducing new behavioral norms for women, a more productive counterterrorism strategy to decrease FST would publicly commit to tolerance and the acceptance of cultural diversity.

To summarize, women are remarkably effective suicide attackers. Given their strategic value, terrorist organizations—first secular ones, then religious groups—have recruited women to perform suicide missions. In order to achieve their strategic goals more effectively, these organizations have developed recruitment tactics aimed at women, employing gender-specific and religious rhetoric. These tactics are often designed to attract females who have failed to adhere to their societies' behavioral gender norms.

WHY GENDER?

Most existing gender studies within IR focus upon either the mechanisms by which gender inequalities are reproduced by domestic and international forces or how the values behind international politics are shaped by notions of masculinity.⁵ In contrast, this study seeks to explain variation in the use of women in regard to a specific coercive strategy, namely suicide terrorism. Analyzing this variation enables me to highlight how gender-specific norms

⁵ J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); J. Ann Tickner, *Gendering World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), chap. 1.

within these societies condition both the behavior of terrorist groups and individual attackers, as well as that of their targets.⁶

My argument does not assume or imply an essential distinction between genders. Rather, it holds that there are both empirical and scholarly reasons to justify a departure from the null hypothesis that the study of ST should be gender neutral. As both a category of practice and a category of analysis, gender is a distinction that deserves attention in the study of ST.⁷ At the individual, group, and societal levels, there is good reason to believe that FST is governed by specific dynamics.⁸ Analyzing them enables us to not only more accurately understand FST but also offers broader insights into the practice of ST in general, thus leading to the formulation of better policy recommendations. Moreover, there is a burgeoning literature on FST, which, in my view, fails to fully understand its causes (see Section 4). It is therefore important to correct this literature.

⁶ Given this, I am attempting to satisfy the three criteria laid out by Whitworth for an IR theory to incorporate gender: (1) enabling discussion of the social construction of meaning, (2) allowing for historical variation, and (3) promoting the discovery of unidentified power relations. Sandra Whitworth, "Gender in the Inter-paradigm Debate," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 18, no. 2 (1989).

⁷ As a category of practice, gender is important for three reasons. First, terrorist groups do not recruit suicide attackers in a gender-neutral way. The chronological development of FST attests to this: women are typically incorporated into ST campaigns much later than men. This lag in recruitment suggests that organizational dynamics in terrorist groups influence differently each gender's opportunities and incentives to become suicide terrorists. Second, suicide attacks conducted by females are more lethal than those conducted by males. Ironically, this greater lethality derives from the limited, gender-specific roles ascribed to women in the societies from which attackers emerge, maximizing the potential for surprise and concealment. Finally, there are important demographic dissimilarities between male and female attackers. Women attackers are significantly older and more likely to have experienced the killing of a family member (in the context of the conflict) than their male counterparts. Alternatively, as a category of analysis, gender is meaningful for two reasons. First, the societies from which female attackers emerge do have norms that condition the identity and behavior of women differently from those of men. These, in turn, affect the behavior of terrorists' targets. To that extent, gender is a meaningful category for studying these societies and, therefore, the emergence of FST within them. In fact, there is a wide body of work illustrating how the genders are socialized and conditioned differently within societies where ST has emerged. Each of the societies that have generated FST is seen as endorsing gender-specific values regarding the role of women. Such values include a strong emphasis on the familial role of females, a high value placed upon marital fidelity, and a sphere of influence focusing primarily on the household.

⁸ For general literature on gender in the Middle East, see Pinar Ilkkanacan, ed., *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies* (Istanbul: Women for Women's Human Rights, 2000); Nikki R. Keddie, *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993). For literature on gender in specific Eastern societies, see Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Suad Joseph, ed., *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000); Suad Joseph and Susan Slyomovics, eds., *Women and Power in the Middle East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan: Gender and National Memory in Iranian History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

Methodology and Sources

This article is unique compared to previous studies of FST in that it is grounded upon a global survey of all past female suicide attacks.⁹ To complement this data, I also examine several case studies of individual attackers.

In my survey of FST, I use a database of all known female suicide terrorist attacks and compare it to information from a database of all ST attacks between 1981 and July 2008.¹⁰ This information has been obtained in large part through the Chicago Project on Suicide Terrorism (CPOST) and supplemented by data provided by Ami Pedahzur and independent research.¹¹ To complement my quantitative analysis, I conduct five short case studies of female suicide attackers in the individual-motives section (Section 4), covering different conflicts. These cases employ both primary (martyrdom videos, interview transcripts) and secondary sources (press reports, previous scholarship).

HOW "EFFECTIVE" IS FEMALE SUICIDE TERRORISM?

In this section, I examine whether the use of FST offers any tactical or strategic advantages for terrorist organizations. To do so, I compare the lethality of individual ST attacks, team ST attacks, and the number of ineffective attacks (zero victims) according to the gender of the perpetrator(s). In the first sub-section I show that female attackers are significantly more effective than their male counterparts. The second sub-section introduces an argument for the superior effectiveness of FST: it results from expectations governed by norms that regulate women's behavior in the societies where the attacks take place.

⁹ I am aware of the methodological critiques raised by Ashworth et al. regarding large-N studies of suicide terrorism, but I do not believe that these critiques are applicable to my study. In Sections 2 and 3, I focus on organizational decisions to employ female attackers, thus my sample is already limited just to ST groups, not all terrorist groups. In Section 4, regarding the individual motives, I try to focus my attention on group behavior in terms of the promotion of gender-specific norms. Scott Ashworth, Joshua Clinton, Adam Meirowitz, and Kristopher Ramsay, "Design, Inference and the Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 2 (April 2008).

¹⁰ Information on each attack includes date, number of casualties, location, type of explosive device, number of suicide attackers, terrorist group, and target state. The database also contains demographic information on all known male and female suicide terrorists prior to January 2004, as well as demographic data on all identified female suicide terrorists since that time, including the attacker's name, gender, age, ideological position, marital status, education, and social class. The demographic information available on each attack varies depending upon the journalistic and scholarly coverage of the region in which it takes place. Still, the database contains the date and location of all known attacks, the number of casualties, the type of weapon used, and name of the terrorist group for over 90 percent of all attacks.

¹¹ Portions of Pedahzur's data can be found in Ami Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2005). Additionally, Pedahzur provided the author a database of all Palestinian suicide terrorists.

TABLE 1 Average Casualties per Individual Attack by Group

	Lebanese	PKK	LTTE	Chechen	Palestinian	Total
Female	2.3	2.3	12.1	20.9	3.4	8.4
Male	3.3	1.4	10.4	13.3	4.0	5.3
Percentage (Female: Male)	70%	164%	116%	157%	85%	158%

The Superior Effectiveness of Female Attacks

As suggested by Table 1, comparing the lethality of attacks by gender across groups that employ women illustrates the strategic value of women compared to men from the perspective of the militant organization.¹² In this section, I present three measures of attacker “effectiveness” for groups that employed a significant number of female attackers across five conflicts: Lebanese groups vs. Israel and the South Lebanon Army, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) vs. Turkey, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) vs. Sri Lanka, Chechen separatists vs. Russia, and Palestinian groups vs. Israel. To begin with, the average number of victims resulting from individual attacks conducted by women is 8.4, versus 5.3 killed per male attack. Although the effectiveness of FST varies across conflicts, the evidence suggests that overall, women inflict more casualties in individual attacks.¹³

Since, however, FST often comes significantly later in suicide campaigns compared to male attacks, time could have two plausible impacts upon the lethality of attacks. On the one hand, later attacks could be more effective because the organizations have had time to perfect their bomb-making skills. On the other hand, later attacks could be less effective because the target state has had time to develop defenses against ST. To test for the effect of gender on lethality controlling for time, I ran a negative binomial of the 498 attacks within the groups that employ women. I then used CLARIFY statistical software to estimate the number of predicted casualties for men and women in individual attacks using the data for each conflict with a Monte Carlo simulation, controlling for time by setting it to the mean year of the conflict.¹⁴

¹² This is important given significant variation in the bomb-making capabilities or terrorist organizations and the availability of desirable targets by conflict. Though I would have liked to include the entire sample of female attackers, I had to limit my analysis in two ways: (1) I was unable to include Iraqi attackers because I have insufficient data on group membership, and (2) I did not include data on Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Somalia, and Uzbekistan because women committed very few attacks in these conflicts compared to men. Had I included these attackers, the findings would have been biased in favor of my argument.

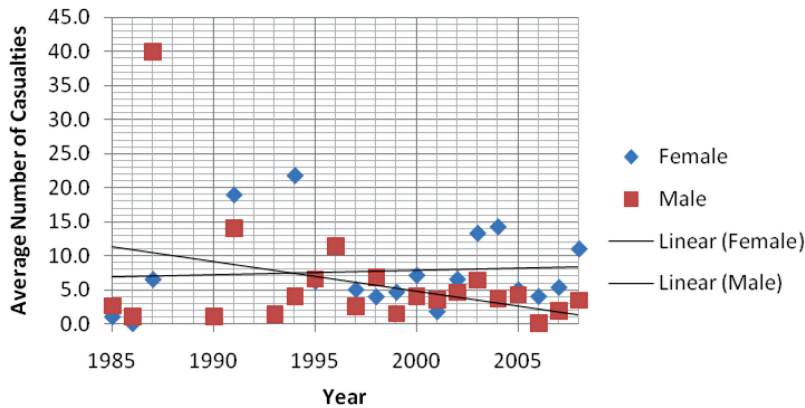
¹³ Lebanese groups employing women include the SSP, LLO, Ba’ath Party, and the Lebanese Communist Party. I have not included Hezbollah or Amal because they have not employed female attackers.

¹⁴ Michael Tomz, Jason Wittenberg, and Gary King, CLARIFY: Software for Interpreting and Presenting Statistical Results, version 2.0 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1 June 2001), <http://gking.harvard.edu>; Gary King, Michael Tomz, and Jason Wittenberg, “Making the Most of Statistical Analyses: Improving Interpretation and Presentation,” *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 2 (April 2000): 347–61.

TABLE 2 Negative Binomial Predictions of Average Casualties per Individual Attack by Group

	Lebanese	PKK	Tamils	Chechen	Palestinian	Total
Female	5.3	4.7	7.9	18	9.2	8.0
Male	3.4	2.9	4.9	11.3	5.8	5.0
Percentage (Female: Male)	156%	162%	161%	159%	159%	160%

Note: The Prob > chi2 value is 0.000, the Log likelihood is -679.94554, alpha = 0, and the LR chi2(3) is 14.43. All coefficients were statistically significant.

**FIGURE 1** Scatterplot of Average Number of Casualties by Gender over Time.

Controlling for time as in Figure 2, the discrepancy in predicted casualties by sex slightly increases, suggesting that the effectiveness of female attackers exists even in the face of increased defensive measures. In particular, women became significantly more effective in Lebanon and Palestine, suggesting that their later deployment within the suicide terrorism campaign (two and eight years respectively) negatively impacted the lethality of their attacks.

As Figure 1 illustrates, a scatterplot of the average number casualties by gender per year supports this hypothesis. While a fitted line for the average casualty number from male attacks decreases significantly between 1985 and 2008, the average number from female attacks rises slightly. This suggests that as the frequency of suicide terrorist attacks increases over time, target states are better able to develop defenses against male suicide attackers than they are against female attackers.¹⁵

The higher effectiveness of FST also translates into deadlier team attacks. To test for this, I compared the average number of casualties per individual in team attacks by sex as shown in Table 3.

¹⁵ A negative binomial regression comparing the number killed by attacker controlling for sex, year, and conflict further supports this hypothesis. The coefficient for sex (moving from male to female) is .44, while the coefficient for year is -.06. The Prob > chi2 value is 0.000, the Log likelihood is -679.94554, alpha = 0, and the LR chi2(3) is 34.13. All coefficients were statistically significant.

TABLE 3 Average Casualties per Individual in Team Attacks

	Lebanese	PKK	LTTE	Chechen	Palestinian	Total
Female	N/A	N/A	4.1	12.6	N/A	8.3
Male	0.7	N/A	3	8.7	4.3	3.6
Percentage (Female: Male)	N/A	N/A	137%	145%	N/A	231%

Again, to control for the effect of time, I ran a negative binomial regression and used CLARIFY to estimate the number of predicted casualties by sex (Table 4). In the cases where women conducted team attacks, these attacks inflicted higher casualties per individual than those conducted by teams of male attackers.

Although the predicted casualties from female attacks decreased when controlling for time, team attacks with women produced more casualties per individual attacker than team attacks with men.

A third measure of the lethality of FST compares genders on the percentage of ineffective suicide attacks within the groups that employ women—that is, those producing no casualties beyond the attacker(s). As shown in Table 5, although men failed to kill anyone in one-third (33.3 percent) of the attacks they conducted, women failed in one-sixth (16.9 percent) of their attacks.

In sum, female suicide attacks are more likely to inflict casualties and are more lethal at both the individual and team levels. I now lay out an explanation for why this is so.

Causes of the Superior Effectiveness of Female Attacks

Ironically, the superior effectiveness of FST derives from the specific norms regulating women's behavior in the society where the attacks take place. Social prejudices about the role of women impact the effectiveness of female attackers in three ways: women generate less suspicion; they are better able to conceal explosives; and they are subjected to more relaxed security measures.

At least in the initial stages of a particular conflict in which FST is employed, women do not conform to the stereotype of terrorist attackers. They are therefore less likely to arouse suspicion. The fact that male Afghan and Iraqi suicide terrorists have disguised themselves as women in order to infiltrate well-guarded police stations supports this claim.¹⁶ Remarkably, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security failed to include women in its official profile of potential terrorists used to screen visa applicants after September

¹⁶ See Edward Wong, "Rebels Dressed as Women Attack Iraqi Police Stations," *The New York Times*, 5 November 2005; Medea Group Limited, "Female Suicide Bombers."

TABLE 4 Negative Binomial Predictions of Average Casualties per Individual in Team Attacks

	Lebanese	PKK	LTTE	Chechen	Palestinian	Total
Female	1.4	N/A	3.7	12.7	4.9	4.7
Male	1.1	N/A	2.9	10.2	3.8	3.7
Percentage (Female: Male)	127%	N/A	128%	125%	129%	127%

Note: The Prob > chi2 value is 0.000, the Log likelihood is -411.23937, alpha = 0, and the LR chi2(3) is 40.84. All coefficients were statistically significant.

11th.¹⁷ In Chechnya, a July 2003 investigative report by the Russian news magazine *Kommersant-Vlast* found that a potential female suicide bomber could easily avoid public suspicion. As part of the investigation, a female journalist wearing a full niqab, tightly clutching a black satchel to her chest, and behaving in a nervous manner was able trace the footsteps of failed suicide bomber Zarema Muzhakhoyeva with no difficulty. In fact, she managed to secure a table at the same cafe where the failed attack took place, without ever being questioned.¹⁸

Furthermore, female suicide terrorists have been used in societies where wearing loose, full-body coverings is common among women, maximizing their potential for carrying explosives attached to their bodies. According to a British report, a woman in traditional clothing could conceal over twelve pounds of explosives on her body. In addition, female suicide terrorists frequently disguise themselves as pregnant in order to smuggle a larger explosive device. There are several documented cases (including Chechen, Palestinian, Kurdish, and Tamil attackers) of female bombers feigning pregnancy.¹⁹ Finally, the societies in which FST attacks take place tend to regard invasive physical searches as threatening a woman's honor, making females less likely to be thoroughly searched than males. According to the same British source, "The terrorists know there are sensitivities about making intimate body searches of women, particularly Muslim women, and thus you can see why some groups might be planning to use a female bomber. Hiding explosives in an intimate part of the body means even less chance of detection."²⁰ For example, nearly five years into the Iraq War, one member of the Iraqi Tribal Awakening Movement that helps to secure Baghdad declared, "We search every single person coming to the market, especially those who are carrying bags or boxes, but the suicide bomber was a female, whom we

¹⁷ Jessica Stern, "When Bombers are Women," *The Washington Post*, 18 December 2003.

¹⁸ John Reuter, "Chechnya's Suicide Bombers: Desperate, Devout or Deceived," *The American Committee for Peace in Chechnya* (2004): 8.

¹⁹ Mia Bloom, "Mother, Daughter, Sister, Bomber," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (November/December 2005).

²⁰ Bloom, "Mother, Daughter, Sister, Bomber."

TABLE 5 Suicide Attacks to Inflict Zero Casualties by Gender

	Attacks to Inflict Zero Casualties	Attacks to Inflict More Than Zero Casualties	Zero Casualty Attacks as Percentage of Total ST Attacks
Female	13	64	17%
Male	102	204	33%

Note: Using a Pearson contingency table, these findings were found to be statistically significant at the $P < 0.004$ level with a chi-square of 7.92.

don't search at all."²¹ Feigning pregnancy may also decrease the likelihood of being subjected to a thorough physical search.

This norm-based explanation for the effectiveness of women attackers is further reinforced by the chronological development of FST. In seven of the eleven conflicts that employed women, there was a significant time lapse between the first (male) ST attack and the emergence of FST.²² Given this, female attackers were introduced after the target state implemented counterterrorism measures, decreasing the success probability and the lethality of subsequent attacks. The superior effectiveness of female attacks in these conflicts, therefore, is achieved under unfavorable conditions, in the later stages of the ST campaign.²³

Terrorist groups seem to acknowledge the advantage female attackers present in terms of circumventing counterterrorism measures while carrying more explosives. This perception is evident when considering the bomber's gender for an attack upon a specific individual. Again focusing upon the groups that employ women, female attackers have committed an impressive 60 percent of assassination ST attacks for which the gender of the perpetrator has been identified.²⁴ In fact, as Table 6 shows, one in every four women who conducted a suicide attack did so with the purpose of assassinating a particular individual.

FST is also likely to be particularly effective in terms of its psychological impact on the target state. It is a well-established fact within the social sciences that women are generally less violent than men, less likely to commit homicide, and less likely to commit suicide.²⁵ Social beliefs tend to

²¹ Abbas Aziz, quoted by Stephen Farrell and Mudhafer al-Husani, "Two Bombings Wreak Carnage in Iraqi Capital," *The New York Times*, 2 February 2008.

²² There is a one year difference for the Tamils, two years for the Lebanese, four years for the Kashmiri, five years for the Pakistani, seven years for the Afghans, and eight years for the Palestinians. Females were involved in the first ST attack for the Chechens, Islamic Jihad Union in Uzbekistan, Al-Qaeda in Somalia, and the PKK. The difference is irrelevant (one month) in Iraq.

²³ This suspicion is confirmed by an OLS regression of the number killed by year controlling for conflict, which has a coefficient of -0.47 at the 0.000 level of statistical significance.

²⁴ Data from the CPOST, supplemented by Rosemarie Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers* (New York: McFarland, 2005).

²⁵ David Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1999).

TABLE 6 Suicide Assassination Attacks by Gender

	Total Assassination Attempts	As Percentage of Total Assassination Attempts	Assassination Attempts as Percentage of Total ST Attacks
Female	25	60%	27%
Male	17	40%	5%

Note: Using a Pearson's contingency table, these findings were found to be statistically significant at the $P < .0001$ level with a chi-square of 39.19.

mirror these perceptions. This is particularly likely to happen when the target state has gender-specific norms in which women are typically allocated non-violent roles. As a violent act of homicide-suicide, FST shatters all these beliefs, provoking a sense of outrage and bewilderment in the target state and generating greater journalistic coverage. This increases the target society's expectations about the future costs of the conflict and may well hinder the target government's ability to keep fighting.

In sum, female suicide terrorists offer numerous tactical advantages compared with male attackers, as illustrated by the greater lethality of their attacks, the greater frequency of FST assassination attacks, and the increased public outrage and media coverage they generate. This effectiveness results from the gender norms of the societies where FST attacks take place; such norms enable female attackers to achieve greater surprise and concealment.

Organizational Dynamics: Strategy or Ideology?

The superior effectiveness of female suicide terrorists, as established in the previous section, is the main reason why terrorist groups increasingly employ them. In this section, I focus on the organizational dynamics behind the use of female suicide attackers. I make three main points. First, secular organizations, being less committed to established gender roles, tend to be the first movers in the use of FST and are more likely to adopt it. Second, religious organizations, after initially discouraging the use of FST in keeping with their endorsement of traditional gender roles, have revised their policy in conflicts where secular organizations have employed the practice. Finally, the pattern of FST across secular and religious groups demonstrates that in the world of ST, strategy trumps ideology. In other words, I argue that the superior effectiveness of female attackers led both secular and religious terrorist organizations to employ women at the service of the groups' strategic goals.

Out of a total of twenty-four suicide campaigns, seventeen groups have used female suicide attackers: the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP) and three smaller groups within Lebanon; the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE) in Sri Lanka; the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey; Chechen separatist groups such as Riyadh-as-Saliheen in Russia; insurgents in Iraq; Al-Qaeda in Somalia; the Islamic Jihad Group in Uzbekistan; Kashmiri insurgents in India; Afghan and Pakistani militants; Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade in Palestine.²⁶ Table 7 below includes all ST campaigns in the past, highlighting both group orientation and the use of female attackers.

In the following analysis, I look at secular and religious terrorist organizations separately, focusing on their use of female attackers and the groups' own statements for or against FST. I then extract some conclusions.

Secular Terrorist Organizations

Empirically, the most striking feature in the use of FST is that nearly 85 percent of attacks conducted by women were carried out on behalf of secular organizations.²⁷ In contrast, Pape found that only 57 percent of all attackers across genders acted at the behest of a secular ideology.²⁸

All of the strictly secular groups use female suicide attackers: the PKK used female attackers 75 percent of the time, the Tamil Tigers used women over 25 percent of the time, Chechen Separatists employed women for 66 percent of their attackers, the SSNP used 45 percent female attackers, and the Al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade used 15 percent. The first organization to deploy female suicide bombers was the SSNP, a secular pro-Syrian Lebanese organization that fought against Israeli forces in Lebanon during the 1980s. Three additional secular groups in Lebanon subsequently employed one woman each.²⁹ The next major group to employ women was the LTTE, a nationalist and secessionist resistance organization aimed at securing a sovereign homeland for the Tamils within Sri Lanka.³⁰ The third group to employ women, the PKK, was formed in 1974 as a Marxist-Leninist organization aimed at securing a sovereign homeland for the Kurdish population of southeastern Turkey.³¹ The Chechen separatists became the fourth major group to adopt FST, deploying their first female bomber in 2000 against Russian military and civilian

²⁶ The SSNP and PKK each participated in two campaigns, while the LTTE adopted ST in four campaigns.

²⁷ To determine the political and religious ideology of the terrorist organizations, I looked at the history of the conflicts, the propaganda and rhetoric of the terrorist leaders, as well as previous academic studies of each group.

²⁸ Pape, *Dying to Win*, 211.

²⁹ See Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

³⁰ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *The Tamil Tigers-Armed Struggle for Identity* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1994).

³¹ See Nur Bilge Criss, "The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 8 (1995): 17–37; Christopher Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 155–67.

TABLE 7 Suicide Terrorism Campaigns 1981–2007

Suicide Terrorism Campaign	Dates	Women	Group Orientation
Lebanese Groups vs. United States and France	18 Apr. 1983–20 Sept. 1984	No	Religious
Lebanese Groups vs. Israel	11 Nov. 1982–15 Jun. 1985	Yes	Religious and Secular*
Lebanese Groups vs. Israel/South Lebanon Army	09 July 1985–20 Nov. 1986	Yes	Religious and Secular*
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam vs. Sri Lanka	10 July 1990–24 Oct. 1994	Yes	Secular
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam vs. Sri Lanka	19 Apr. 1995–23 Oct. 2000	Yes	Secular
Hamas vs. Israel	06–13 Apr. 1994	No	Religious
Hamas/Islamic Jihad vs. Israel	19 Oct. 1994	No	Religious
BKJ vs. India	31 Aug. 1995	No	Religious
Hamas vs. Israel	25 Feb.–04 Mar. 1996	No	Religious
Hamas vs. Israel	21 Mar.–04 Sept. 1997	No	Religious
Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) vs. Turkey	30 June–29 Oct. 1996	Yes	Secular
Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) vs. Turkey	11 Nov. 1998–28 Aug. 1999	Yes	Secular
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam vs. Sri Lanka	13 Nov. 1995–15 Nov. 2001	Yes	Secular
Al-Qaeda vs. United States	13 Nov. 1995–present	No	Religious
Chechen Separatists vs. Russia	7 June 2000–present	Yes	Secular
Kashmiri Separatists vs. India	25 Dec. 2000–present	Yes	Religious
Palestinian Groups vs. Israel	26 Oct. 2000–present	Yes	Religious and Secular**
Taliban vs. United States, Rival Groups and Allies	Sept. 9 2001–present	Yes	Religious and Secular***
Pakistani Groups vs. Pakistan, United States and Allies	8 May 2002–present	Yes	Religious and Secular***
Iraqi Rebels vs. United States and Allies	22 Mar. 2003–present	Yes	Religious and Secular****
Islamic Jihad Union vs. Uzbekistan, United States and Allies	28 Mar. 2004–present	Yes	Religious
Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) vs. Turkey	17 July 2005–present	Yes	Secular
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam vs. Sri Lanka	25 Apr. 2006–present	Yes	Secular
Al-Qaeda vs. Somalia	20 Nov. 2006–present	Yes	Religious

*Women acted on behalf of the secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP).

**Women acted on behalf of both the secular Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade as well as the religious groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

***The affiliation of the female attackers has not been determined.

****Iraqi female suicide terrorists have acted on behalf of both secular and religious organizations.

targets.³² Finally, the fifth major terrorist organization to admit women into its ranks was the Al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigades, a secular Palestinian organization aimed at counterbalancing support for the Islamist organizations in favor of the secular Palestinian Authority and Fatah.³³

Leaders of secular terrorist organizations encouraged women to participate in front-line combat from the beginning of their ST campaigns. They also used rhetoric aimed at recruiting female attackers, reinforcing the equal participation of women in their conflict. The female SSNP suicide bombers were immortalized as the "Brides of the South" and hailed by Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad as an exemplification of feminine virtue.³⁴ The Tamil Tigers also frame the participation of women in front-line combat and suicide attacks as an opportunity for them to demonstrate they are as dedicated to the cause as men. One characteristic statement reads: "Women, Tamil women, have long been subject to oppression of a dual nature. On the one hand, women comprising a little more than fifty percent of the Tamil people have borne the brunt of the national oppression stemming from chauvinist Sinhala policies. On the other hand, women have been subject to an internal form of social oppression rising out of male chauvinism."³⁵

The PKK also promotes female membership in its group as a way to illustrate equal devotion. PKK leader Öcalan claimed, "[T]hese women were fully aware and fully desirous of being free women with an important message to pass on and who could be examples to all women the world over."³⁶ Similarly, secular Palestinian groups emphasize that suicide attacks offer women the opportunity to demonstrate they are as committed to the cause as men. "Suicide bombings have pulled women out of the boxes created by society—the box of a weeping, wailing creature always crying for help."³⁷

The only exception to this tendency appears to be the Chechens. While allowing women to become active participants in suicidal and non-suicidal attacks, the Chechen separatists do not offer much evidence to suggest that they frame the struggle in terms of women's equal participation. Instead,

³² Despite many individual bombers being Muslim, I classify the Chechens as a secular organization based upon previous studies that agree the Chechen movement is best thought of in nationalistic terms with religion playing a secondary role. In her analysis of thirty-four Chechen suicide terrorists, Speckhard found that 82 percent were raised in a secular Muslim environment, while 18 percent were raised in a traditional Muslim background. While there has been an influx in the region of Arab fighters who practice a form of fundamentalist Wahhabism, there is little evidence suggesting that these views have attracted a large following in Chechnya. See Reuter, "Chechnya's Suicide Bombers"; Anne Speckhard and Khapta Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism," *Journal of Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2005): 452; Reuven Paz, *Suicide Terrorist Operations in Russia: An Escalation of the Islamist Struggle* (Herzliya, Israel: The Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 20 June 2000).

³³ Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism*, 64.

³⁴ Lisa Weeden, *Ambiguities of Domination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 62–65.

³⁵ Adele Ann, "Women and the Struggle for Tamil Eelam: Freedom Birds of Tamil Eelam," (1990), <http://www.eelamweb.com/women> (accessed 16 August 2006).

³⁶ Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon*, 155.

³⁷ Arnon Regular, "Suicide Training Almost Feminist," *Haaretz International*, 11 February 2005.

statements by Chechen terrorist leaders emphasize the fact that many of the female suicide attackers acted following the death of a family member—usually their husbands—in the context of the conflict. In sum, secular terrorist organizations have employed female suicide attackers early and often. Most of these groups encourage the participation of females in suicide attacks through discourse emphasizing the importance of women displaying their willingness to support the groups' goal as much as men.

Religious Terrorist Organizations

None of the strictly Islamist campaigns employed female suicide attackers for the first twenty-one years after the inception of sr. The campaigns launched by Hezbollah (United States/France 1983–1984), Hamas (Israel, 1994, 1994–1995, 1996, 1997), or PIJ (Israel, 1994–1995) involved no female attackers.

Although secular organizations emphasize the advantages of using female attackers, religious organizations for a long time discouraged FST use. Arguments against FST take several forms. Several terrorist leaders argue that women make poor attackers because they lack the psychological and physical prowess of men. For example, at the start of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, then Hamas leader Sheik Yassin claimed, “[M]en are more efficient because they are better at hiding out with the bomb after having crossed the Green Line. They are stronger psychologically than women, who might not be able to stay hidden and alone in the dark in an orange grove or at the bottom of a garbage dump or anywhere until the moment for the attack arrives.”³⁸ Other common arguments are that the role of women in society should be limited to the private realm or that FST will continue to be unnecessary as long as there are sufficient numbers of potential male attackers. “A woman martyr is problematic for Muslim society. A man who recruits a woman is breaking Islamic law. He is taking the girl or woman without the permission of her father, brother or husband, and therefore the family of the girl confronts an even greater problem since the man has the biggest power over her, choosing the day that she will give her life back to Allah.”³⁹ This statement reflects Hamas's long-standing belief that women should be relegated to a primarily supportive role within the organization. Hamas first adopted sr in 1994 during the Oslo Peace Process and resumed the practice for three additional campaigns during the 1990s. Women were not involved in any of Hamas's first four campaigns.⁴⁰ Characteristically, Article 17 of the Hamas Charter, published in 1988, declares, “The Muslim woman has a role in the

³⁸ Sheik Yassin, quoted in Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2003), 197.

³⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁰ Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 142–66.

struggle for liberation that does not fall from that of a man in that she is the one who produces the men.”⁴¹

Religious groups, however, began to employ female attackers after a secular group involved in the same conflict (and thus competing for the support of the same population) set an example by using a female suicide terrorist. Similar to secular terrorist groups, religious organizations frame the use of FST in terms of the need for women to display support for the groups' cause. In other words, religious organizations have endorsed FST, even though some of them have stopped short of making armed struggle a requirement for women.⁴² But in contrast to secular groups, religious organizations have continued to emphasize established gender roles in what seems to be an effort to avoid alienating its male constituents.

In 2004, nearly nineteen years after secular groups embraced FST, Hamas became the first religious organization to claim responsibility for a female attacker. Following Wafa Idris's suicide attack in January 2002 on behalf of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade—and the Palestinian public's overwhelmingly positive response to that attack—Hamas's leadership gradually amended its views and began to accept women.⁴³ After Hamas's first female attack, Yassin declared, “[T]he fact that a woman took part for the first time in a Hamas operation marks a significant evolution. . . . The holy way is an imperative for all Muslim men and women, and this operation proves that the armed resistance will continue until the enemy is driven out from our land.”⁴⁴ The recent use of women attackers by Hamas does not, however, mean that the organization promotes gender equality within its ranks. Indeed, according to Hamas spokesman Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi, terrorist organizations provide a stipend of approximately \$400 per month to the families of male suicide bombers but only \$200 per month to the families of female bombers.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Yassin first stipulated that a woman could commit a suicide

⁴¹ Mira Tzoreff, “The Palestinian Shahida: National Patriotism, Islamic Feminism or Social Crisis,” in *Female Suicide Terrorists*, ed. Yoram Schweitzer (Tel Aviv: Jaffe Center Publications, 2005).

⁴² While some religious groups have endorsed women's duty to commit martyrdom for the groups' cause, others have not gone that far. Muslim cleric Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah said, “It is true that Islam has not asked women to carry out jihad [holy war], but it permits them to take part if the necessities dictate that women should carry out regular military operations or suicide operations.” Sheikh Fadlallah, interview in “Lebanese Muslim Cleric OK's Female Suicide Bombers,” *Business Recorder*, 2 April 2002.

⁴³ Idris became a symbol of bravery and sacrifice and inspired other young women to commit FST acts. Her picture was used on posters throughout the region, political and cultural leaders celebrated her memory, and an Egyptian television program aired her story throughout the Arab world. The editor of *Al-Arabi*, a weekly Nasserite magazine, wrote, “[S]he is Joan of Arc, Jesus Christ and the Mona Lisa.” Victor, *Army of Roses*, 25–26. One of Fatah's leaders said, “Wafa's martyrdom restored honor to the national role of the Palestinian woman” (ibid., 54).

⁴⁴ Sheik Yassin, quoted in Bloom, “Mother, Daughter, Sister, Bomber,” 7.

⁴⁵ Victor, *Army of Roses*, 35.

attack only if a male chaperon accompanied her in case "she is to be gone for a day and a night. If her absence is shorter, she does not need a chaperon."⁴⁶

This same pattern of FST spreading from secular to religious groups holds for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). In 2003, the PIJ began an active campaign to recruit female bombers. This campaign included a newsletter featuring young female recruits discussing the benefits of combining a women's domestic role with suicide bombings.⁴⁷ One PIJ promotional declares, "[O]ur women are no longer the type of women who cry or weep. We have martyrdom women now."⁴⁸ In 2004, the PIJ reversed ten years of male-only ST by perpetrating its first FST attack.

Hezbollah, which remained silent on the question of the secular Lebanese female suicide terrorists during the 1980s, has yet to use a female suicide attacker. Still, the group's spiritual leader, Mohammad Fadlallah, issued a statement approving female attackers in 2002.⁴⁹ Subsequently, six additional fatwas from prominent religious leaders in the Middle East and Europe reinforce this claim.⁵⁰ Even Al-Qaeda appears to be following this trend beginning with two female suicide terrorists who attempted to commit joint attacks with their husbands. Moreover, the August 2004 issue of the on-line magazine *Al Khansaa*, published by the Arabian Peninsula Women's Information Bureau—which acknowledges ties to Al-Qaeda—stated, "Women in the family is a mother, wife, sister and daughter [sic]. In society she is an educator, propagator, and preacher of Islam, and a female jihad warrior . . . When jihad becomes a personal obligation, then the woman is summoned like a man, and need ask permission neither from her husband nor from her guardian, because she is obligated, and none need carry out a commandment that everyone must carry out."⁵¹

In short, each of the major religious groups that adopted FST— Hamas, PIJ, and Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia—has similar rhetoric. These groups emphasize the need for women to participate in the suicide campaign yet continue to deploy gender-specific rhetoric endorsing the societal norms. Significantly, each of these groups has kept the proportion of female attackers at less than 3 percent, perhaps to prevent the alienation of long-time male supporters. Three other religious terrorist groups have since employed female suicide attackers. Two female attacks were perpetrated on behalf of the Uzbek Islamic Jihad Union and one female attack on behalf of Al-Qaeda in Somalia.⁵²

⁴⁶ Sheik Yassin, quoted in Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, 150.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Muhammad Daraghmei, "In Search of Stealthier Suicide Attackers: Islamic Jihad Encourages Women," Associated Press, 31 May 2003.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Medea Group Limited, "Female Suicide Bombers," 17.

⁵¹ Bloom, "Mother, Daughter, Sister, Bomber."

⁵² Reporting Central Asia, "Uzbekistan: Affluent Suicide Bombers," RCA no. 278 (London: Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 20 April 2004); Salad Duhul, "3 Suicide Bombers Kill 8 in Somalia," Associated Press (30 November 2006).

In Kashmir, although men had committed thirty suicide attacks in the region since the outbreak of the insurgency in 1989, a woman did not strike until 2005.⁵³

Since the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, several insurgent groups employed ST in attacks on the United States, its allies, representatives of the new Iraqi government, and rival religious groups. Unfortunately, given the variety of groups conducting the bombings and the fog of war, it is difficult to say what role religion plays as a motivation. However, the frequency of FST attacks in Iraq suggests that groups have undergone a learning process regarding the strategic value of women. While approximately a dozen women committed attacks between 2003 and December 2007, between January and July 2008, women committed at least twenty-seven attacks in Iraq during a period of relative decline for ST in general. One plausible hypothesis for this increase is that Iraqi groups were more willing to employ female attackers having learned of their strategic value in the face of increased defensive measures.

Taken as a whole, the empirical evidence suggests that FST started largely as a secular phenomenon. The significantly higher rate of participation of female attackers in secular campaigns seems to indicate, *prima facie*, that FST is—and will remain—a secular phenomenon. However, a deeper look at the chronological evolution of FST and at intergroup dynamics in each conflict shows that this conclusion is misleading. The pattern of FST's development indicates that, in many cases, religious groups are willing to employ female attackers in the aftermath of an FST attack perpetrated by a rival group. Consequently, there is good reason to believe that as more secular groups employ female attackers, religious groups will follow their lead, recruiting higher numbers of women. Interestingly, both secular and religious groups frame female participation in suicide attacks in terms of the need for both genders to demonstrate their commitment to the organizations' cause, with feminist arguments relegated to a minor role in the groups' discourse.

By embracing FST, terrorist organizations effectively double the population from which they can recruit attackers. The use of female attackers may also strengthen mass backing for the terrorist group. It fosters support by women, broadening the group's societal basis. It also signals the group's commitment to its political cause, revealed by a willingness to deploy a weapon—FST—that has long been considered taboo in light of the respective society's role in prescribing gender-specific behavioral norms for women. Moreover, given that many of the target states also embrace gender-specific norms, employing female attackers can help generate media coverage and potential sympathy for the organization's cause. In short, not only is FST an effective weapon, it is also good PR.

⁵³ Mujtaba Ali Ahmad, "India's First Female Suicide Bomber Strikes," Associated Press (13 October 2005).

FST is spreading through a learning and imitation process comprising both secular and religious terrorist organizations. The demonstrated superior effectiveness of attacks conducted by women led both types of groups to carry them out. In a 2003 interview, Umm Osama, a reported female Al-Qaeda agent, claimed to "oversee the training of female mujahideen affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban." According to her, the purpose of this unit was to build "a women's structure that will carry out operations that will make the United States forget its own name."⁵⁴ Umm Osama was clear about why Al-Qaeda decided to recruit female attackers. "The idea of women Kamikazes came from the *success* of martyr operations carried out by young Palestinian women in the occupied territories. Our organization will be open to all women wanting to serve the (Islamic) nation, particularly in this very critical phase."⁵⁵ This highlights the demonstrative effect of early FST attacks in proving the superior effectiveness of female attackers, triggering a learning process through which FST spread to other terrorist groups, crossing the secular- and religious-orientation divide. In short, terrorist organizations learn from one another, and they have learned that women are more effective.

Of course the growing use of female attackers may well be reversed if target states adapt their defensive strategies, negating the advantage women have thus far revealed in conducting suicide missions. In this case, ST campaigns conducted by secular groups may indeed become gender neutral in terms of the attackers used, and those conducted by religious groups may reverse a policy that includes female attackers. In sum, having realized that women are particularly effective in conducting suicide attacks, secular groups started to employ FST in order better to accomplish their strategic goals. After they did so, religious groups involved in the same conflicts gradually embraced FST, adapting their discourse and reversing their policies to allow for FST. This indicates that even for terrorist groups driven by religious discourse, strategy takes primacy over ideology.

INDIVIDUAL ATTACKERS: ARE WOMEN DRIVEN BY UNIQUELY FEMININE MOTIVATIONS?

Having looked at the organizational dynamics behind FST, I now turn to the motives of individual female attackers. This allows me to show that while strategy trumps ideology at the group level, the latter still plays a critical role as a connection between terrorist organizations and their (female) attackers. In other words, ideology serves as an interface between each group's strategic goals and each attacker's individual motives. By discursively

⁵⁴ Chan, Sue, quoted in *CBS News*, "FBI Warns of Al-Qaeda Women," 1 April 2003. Interview originally published in the Arabic-language newspaper, *Asharq al-Awsat*.

⁵⁵ Umm Osama, quoted in "America to Face Female Suicide Bombers," *The Cape Times*, 13 March 2003 (emphasis added).

catering to potential recruits, terrorist organizations are better able to enlist them, thus increasing the group's effectiveness—and the likelihood the group will achieve its strategic goal.

Although there is no single profile of female suicide attackers, it is possible to look at the biographies of attackers and statements of terrorist leaders to determine the general patterns of recruitment. Nevertheless, I will argue that the existing literature on FST suffers from two errors. First, although both male and female attackers have experienced a variety of traumatic personal events, scholars are more prone to assume personal motives for female attackers. For instance, Mia Bloom writes, "When men conduct suicide missions, they are motivated by religious or nationalist fanaticism, whereas women appear more often motivated by very personal reasons."⁵⁶ Second, when scholars identify a plausible personal motive for one or more female attackers, they often overgeneralize their findings from the appropriate subset of attackers to include all instances of FST, thereby ignoring differences in demographic data, cultural values, and terrorist group behavior across conflicts. If, however, you grant that there are multiple potential motivations and causal pathways toward deciding to commit a ST attack, as I do, then the task of the researcher is to identify the likely scope of these different motives. Given this, I will highlight how various groups promote diverse norms at different times while recruiting women.

Attackers (across genders) are motivated by a conjunction of group incentives—rhetoric about allegiance to the groups' strategic goals—and individual motives. What is specific about the motivations of female attackers is not that they are more "personal" and less "political" than the motivations of their male counterparts. Rather, I believe that the primary motivation for both men and women comes from a loyalty to their community. The difference resides in how terrorist organizations tie political motivation to certain personal experiences when recruiting female attackers.

Terrorist organizations are well aware of the variety of individual motives for male and female attackers. As such, recruitment tactics aimed specifically at women often involve numerous, even contradictory, arguments. These include feminist appeals for equal participation, the offer of redemption for a woman who has violated the gender roles of her community, revenge, nationalism, and religion—almost any personal motive that does not contradict the main strategic objective.

These gender-specific norms to recruit women serve two purposes. First, in instances where women have not been closely affiliated with the terrorist organization, these norms take advantage of women's commitment to societal gender roles to provide a powerful alternative motivation for perpetrating a suicide attack. In contrast to the existing FST literature, one

⁵⁶ Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, 145.

common motivation I would like to highlight occurs when a woman finds that she has deviated from her society's proscribed gender role and will be subjected to a strong psychological and social pressure to reaffirm those norms.⁵⁷ In some cases, this pressure, conjoined with the incentives terrorist groups provide for females to become suicide attackers, has led women to perpetrate suicide missions on behalf of groups that fight for a cause dear to their society. Second, given the media attention generated by FST and, in particular, the media's focus upon the biographies of female attackers, terrorist organizations have disproportionate incentive to select women whose personal experiences depict the behavior of the target state in a negative light. For instance, they have incentive to recruit female attackers who have been raped or experienced the killing of a family member at the hands of the target state. By highlighting the victimization of women within their society, the terrorist organizations can garner sympathy for their cause from domestic and international audiences.

Alternative Explanations for Female Motives

There are three alternatives to the argument I put forth in this section. The literature on FST offers two explanations for why women become suicide attackers. The first points to resentment regarding gender-specific norms in the society of origin; the second points to psychological factors leading to suicide in general. In addition, the general literature on ST mentions a third possible alternative: group solidarity.

RESENTING SOCIAL NORMS

The first explanation of the individual motives of female attackers in FST literature is that female suicide terrorists resent the gender role for women in their society. The strongest version of this argument is found in Barbara Victor's *Army of Roses*. Based upon biographical studies of Palestinian female suicide bombers, Victor argues that suicide attacks are acts of female

⁵⁷ Emile Durkheim's conception of "altruistic" suicide can serve as a heuristic device for understanding this mechanism. Altruistic suicide occurs when an individual who is highly integrated within a community seeks to commit suicide out of a sense of duty toward that community. Unlike egoistic suicide, the impetus is not that an individual is isolated from the community; quite the contrary, individuals who commit altruistic suicide do so because they are so well integrated within the community that they come to value the community's welfare above their own. In situations in which a suicide is viewed as having value for the community, individuals are willing to sacrifice their own life for the cause. Examples of altruistic suicide include: soldiers who accept "suicide missions" out of the intense bond that they develop with their comrades-in-arms during wartime, certain cultures in which men are required to commit suicide after reaching a certain age or succumbing to sickness, cultures in which women are required to commit suicide after their husband's death, and followers who commit suicide after the death of their chief or leader. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (New York: The Free Press, 1951).

empowerment. Specifically, Victor believes that female suicide terrorists, after suffering a personal trauma produced by the gender roles prescribed for women, resent those norms. In Victor's words, "The idea of equality touches upon the very core of what they long for."⁵⁸ Other authors suggest variations on this argument.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, I believe that these authors overgeneralize the applicability of their findings and thus I reject this argument for several reasons. First, if female suicide bombers truly resent the established gender roles of their societies, why would they perpetrate attacks against target states that uphold more liberal values? Second, many of these studies suffer from conceptual slippage between the desire of women to participate in a terrorist campaign and an embrace of Western feminist values. But one does not follow from the other. To the contrary, in the case of Chechen attackers, they clearly are motivated by a rejection, not an embrace, of liberal values. According to Speckhard, "Chechen females who join terrorist groups in Chechnya actually move backwards in some ways—they take on the traditional Arab dress which has never been indigenous to Chechnya, dress hijab and devote themselves to more traditional roles within groups except for when they enact violent missions."⁶⁰

Also, in the case of Palestinian attackers, the suicide terrorist attack is permeated by the culture's gender inequality. Palestinian terrorist leaders have stipulated that female attackers adhere to established gender roles even in the execution of their attack by requiring a chaperone and offering disproportionate compensation to the families of female attackers. Altogether, this evidence suggests that although motivation for some female suicide terrorists may come from the desire to prove that women are as dedicated to the terrorist group's cause as men, this should not be confused with a rejection of the gender norms for women in their society.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSES

The second account of the motivations of individual female attackers available in the FST literature is that female suicide terrorists are motivated to

⁵⁸ Victor, *Army of Roses*, 235.

⁵⁹ Mia Bloom, for instance, discusses the possibility that female suicide bombers are compelled to escape the traditional roles for women in their society. See Bloom, *Dying to Kill*. See also Debra D. Zedalis, "Female Suicide Bombers" (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, June 2004); Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers*. Speckhard and Akhmedova conducted an in-depth analysis of Chechen female suicide terrorists, determining that personal trauma and the death of a family member often served as individual motivations. Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr." Gunawardena investigated both the individual motives of Tamil female suicide terrorists and the role of gender in the Sri Lankan conflict, arriving to similar conclusions. Arjuna Gunawardena, "Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?" in *Female Suicide Terrorists*.

⁶⁰ Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, "Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists," in *Female Suicide Terrorists*.

commit *st* for reasons that mirror those behind conventional suicide.⁶¹ In explaining the difference between male and female suicide bombers, psychologist Shalfic Masalqa argues, "There are two different dynamics. When an adolescent boy is humiliated at an Israeli checkpoint, from that moment, a suicide bomber is created. At the same time, if a woman becomes a *shabida* [female suicide attacker], one has to look for deeper, more underlying reasons. There are obviously cases where mental illness plays a part, since not all marginalized women within Palestinian society kill themselves. Pathology plays an important role in these cases."⁶² Still, if the motivations for *st* mirror those behind conventional suicide, one would expect female suicide attackers to match the demographic profile of women who commit conventional suicide. Yet this is not the case.

To begin with, there is no evidence that these women suffer from either mental illness or the intense isolation that normally accompanies conventional suicide. Most women who commit suicide attacks are active in their society, whereas 49 percent of individuals who commit conventional suicide have no close friends and do not belong to any social organizations. Moreover, 45-66 percent of people who commit conventional suicide have a history of depression, and 30 percent have previously attempted suicide. We should thus expect female suicide terrorists to exhibit similar signs of mental illness prior to their attack, yet there is scant evidence of depression in their biographies or final martyrdom statements.⁶³ Similarly, while 30 percent of those who commit conventional suicide have a severe physical illness and 25 percent have a history of alcoholism or drug dependence, no female suicide bomber has been known to suffer from either of these predicaments.⁶⁴

To compound the problems with this interpretation, suicide attacks do not conform to the generally non-violent ways in which women tend to commit conventional suicide. While 75 percent of men who commit suicide do so by means that are more violent (firearms, hanging, jumping), only 43 percent of women opted for these methods. Instead, women prefer to commit suicide in less violent ways, such as poisoning or asphyxia.⁶⁵ Finally, while men commit 97 percent of conventional murder-suicides, female murder-suicides are generally limited to a mother and her child(ren) and thus are

⁶¹ I define conventional suicide in opposition to *st*; that is, conventional suicide does not involve violence toward others.

⁶² Shalfic Masalqa, quoted in Victor, *Army of Roses*, 28.

⁶³ Given the lack of available information, it is possible that I have overlooked other cases. Nevertheless, depression only plays a potential prominent role in one of the biographies (Wafa Idris) for which I have strong biographic information.

⁶⁴ Pape, *Dying to Win*, 177.

⁶⁵ Charles Rich, "Some Differences Between Men and Women Who Commit Suicide," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 145 (1988): 6.

essentially different from suicide terrorist attacks.⁶⁶ In fact, the psychological explanation for ST, which was fashionable in the 1980s and early 1990s, has been subsequently discredited.⁶⁷

GROUP SOLIDARITY

Besides resentment and psychological reasons, a third argument regarding the motivations of individual female attackers (which is overlooked by the specific literature on FST) is that of group solidarity.⁶⁸ According to this explanation, suicide attackers kill themselves out of a feeling of allegiance toward the terrorist group, which plays an important role in their identity.

This explanation is plausible. Participation in a terrorist group is indeed likely, over time, to play a role in the motivations of individual attackers by making group identity more salient.⁶⁹ Terrorist organizations, however, vary in how much they allow women to become long-standing, active, and well-connected members. Religious organizations such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Al-Qaeda do not have many long-term female members. Neither do secular groups that are still largely sexually segregated, like the Chechens. I expect the re-embracing logic to be most salient in these groups, in which women have not participated for long. However, for other terrorist organizations that allow women to become long-standing and active members, including the SSNP, LTTE, PLO and PKK, the group solidarity explanation captures a crucial part of the story.

Still, I argue that the group solidarity explanation holds motivations constant, assuming that the attackers have belonged to the terrorist group long before they commit their attack. This neither accounts for potential secondary or even primary motives, nor does it permit a more fluid interpretation of membership in organizations that are often deeply embedded in society. The re-embracing logic, on the contrary, is particularly powerful in situations in which women have not been long-standing members of terrorist organizations. It also elucidates potential scenarios in which women who

⁶⁶ Matthew Nock, "Murder Suicide," *The Harvard Medical School Guide to Suicide Assessment and Intervention* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1999).

⁶⁷ For examples of arguments against the psychological explanation, see Ariel Merari, "The Readiness to Kill and Die: Suicidal Terrorism in the Middle East," in *Origins of Terrorism*, 192–211; Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Clark McCauley, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Social Science Research Council, 2003).

⁶⁸ See Pape, *Dying to Win*; J. Anderson Thomas, Jr., "We Few, We Happy Few, We Band of Brothers (and Occasional Sister!): The Dynamics of Suicide Terrorism" (Eighteenth Biennial Congress, International Society of Human Ethology, Detroit, Michigan, 31 July 2006).

⁶⁹ In their study of Palestinian suicide bombers, Pedahzur and Perliger show that Palestinian suicide attackers "are peripheral figures in the network who join the ranks ad hoc, from the environment close to the network, for the purpose of carrying out a suicide attack." Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger, "The Changing Nature of Suicide Attacks: A Social Network Perspective," *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (June 2006): 2000.

are not official members but who are in fact deeply tied to an organization, carry out an attack on its behalf. In short, the group solidarity explanation points to the correct causal mechanisms, but it too narrowly defines the in-group/out-group distinction and therefore ignores the potential for group allegiance on a societal scale.

In sum, none of the three alternative explanations for the individual motivations of female suicide terrorists seems to apply to a broad array of female attackers. The resentment logic is refuted by the case studies. So is the psychological account. Even the group solidarity explanation fails to account for the many cases in which female suicide attackers have joined the terrorist organization soon before they perpetrate the attack. The failure of all three alternative explanations to portray accurately the individual motives of female suicide attackers stems from a focus that is solely on the individual level (even if, in the case of group solidarity, this focus considers how the individual relates to the group). One limitation of a strictly individual, bottom-up analysis of FST is that it ignores how individual motivations interact with terrorist group aims, strategy, and discourse.

Deviation from Expected Gender Roles

Turning now to instances where women have not been closely affiliated with the terrorist organization, I argue that one common individual motivation for female suicide attackers is to re-embrace societal norms about the behavior of women from which women are perceived to have deviated.⁷⁰ As aforementioned, these norms are often promoted by terrorist organizations as a mechanism for recruitment to further strategic goals. Since my argument asserts female attackers' willingness to re-embrace gender-specific norms, I must first establish that the women's communities of origin do indeed have strong norms regulating female behavior. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on norms that tie the role of women to the familial and domestic spheres and place a high value on the marital fidelity of women.

There are several reasons to believe that all of the societies from which FST emerged meet this standard. For one, each female attacker's state was classified as less developed or least developed in a United Nations report on the progress of women.⁷¹ In addition, the high value that many of these societies (Afghan, Chechen, Iraqi, Lebanese, Kurdish, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Uzbekistani) place on the marital fidelity of women is highlighted by the

⁷⁰ Although I believe that this is a common occurrence, I do not wish to suggest that it alone can be considered either a necessary or sufficient cause.

⁷¹ United Nations Demographic and Social Statistics Branch, *The World's Women 2005: Progress in Statistics* (New York: United Nations, 2005). The one exception to this case is Russia. Still, the cultural values of most of the Russian population vary markedly from those of the Chechen minority. Chechen attackers still live embedded in a traditional society.

continued presence of honor killings during the period I analyze.⁷² Finally, a variety of academic studies on each of the societies in which FST emerged establishes the societies' patriarchal nature.⁷³ Further, if the society's character did not play a role in the motivation of female suicide terrorists, one would expect to find women from societies with more gender-neutral cultural norms among the ranks of female attackers. Still, there has been only one known case of a woman from a Western country committing a suicide terrorist attack. This thirty-eight-year-old Belgian woman had converted to a strict form of Islam and, according to her family, had come to accept strict norms of behavior for women in Muslim society.⁷⁴

Limiting my sample to the pre-2005 era where I have the most reliable and robust demographic data, two considerable dissimilarities emerge.⁷⁵ First, female attackers are significantly older than male attackers. Second, they are also more likely to have experienced the death of a family member(s) in the context of the conflict that sparked the ST campaign. I address these factors separately. I then distill from the existing literature other additional factors reflecting possible motivations for female suicide terrorists: rape, infertility, divorce, and marital infidelity. I do not wish to suggest that any or all of these variables must be found in each instance of FST. In fact, there is no such thing as a typical female suicide attacker, but being unmarried, either due to advanced age, a divorce, or widowhood, may be a factor in roughly half of the cases. The killing of a proximate family member in combat figures prominently in the case of Chechen suicide attackers and in about one-quarter of the cases in other conflicts. Rape may play a role for the Tamil Tigers and potentially also for the PKK and the Chechens. Infertility and infidelity appear to be factors in several individual cases across societies.

MARITAL AGE

Female suicide terrorists are significantly more likely to be in their late twenties and older than male terrorists. Like male suicide attackers, they are

⁷² Lynn Welchmann and Sara Hossain, eds., *Honour: Crimes, Paradigms, and Violence Against Women* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2005).

⁷³ For the Lebanese, see Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). For Kurds, see Pinar Ilkkaracan, "Exploring the Context of Women's Sexuality in Eastern Turkey," in *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Countries* (Istanbul: Women for Women's Human Rights, 2004), 229–45. For Palestinians, see Samira Haj, "Palestinian Women and Patriarchal Relations," *Signs* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 761–78. For Tamils, see Bruce Caldwell, *Marriage in Sri Lanka: A Century of Change* (New Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1999). For Chechens, see Amjad Jaimoukha, *The Chechens: A Handbook* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005).

⁷⁴ "Making of Muriel the Suicide Bomber," *The Sunday Times*, 4 December 2005.

⁷⁵ I believe that including the 2006–08 data would bias my results in favor of my argument given an under-sampling of male demographic data. Biographic data on male attackers appears less often in journalistic coverage of ST attacks during this time period, most likely due to journalistic fatigue as the number of ST attacks increased dramatically in Iraq.

overwhelmingly likely to be single. However, two socially conditioned factors distinguish them from male attackers. First, their societies of origin place a great emphasis on family—and, consequently, married life—as the appropriate realm for females. Second, as women grow older, their prospects for marriage decrease significantly, unlike those of men.

This suggests that one explanation for the discrepancy in ages between genders is that women are motivated to commit suicide attacks due to declining marriage prospects.⁷⁶ To test this hypothesis, I compare the age of female suicide terrorists against the standard marriage patterns for their ethnic groups.⁷⁷ Across all terrorist groups, fewer than 10 percent of the female attackers were married, and approximately 37 percent of the women were past the age by which three-quarters of the women in their society have already married. Figure 2 below provides a comparison of the age of suicide attackers between genders.

The Kurdish and Chechen cases offer strong support for this explanation. None of the ten PKK female suicide attackers were known to be married, and 42.8 percent exceeded the age by which three-quarters of their ethnic group have already married.⁷⁸ In her study of twenty-six Chechen female suicide terrorists, Anne Speckhard found that only four (15.4 percent) were currently married.⁷⁹ Moreover, 53.8 percent of the female Chechen suicide attackers had exceeded the age by which three-quarters of Chechen women have already married.⁸⁰ Lebanese, Palestinian, and Tamil female terrorists each offer more moderate support for this explanation. Although most of these female attackers were single, most were still sufficiently young to have relatively high prospects of getting married.⁸¹

The hypothesis that female suicide attackers are motivated by a desire to conform to the marital values of their societies is further confirmed by the

⁷⁶ A second complementary explanation for this discrepancy in ages may be that older unmarried women have greater opportunities for committing suicide attacks compared to younger or married women because they have greater freedom to act without having to acquire familial approval.

⁷⁷ Iraqis have been excluded because the only confirmed age of a successful female suicide terrorist is thirty-eight. Moreover, she participated in a joint attack with her husband.

⁷⁸ State Institute of Statistics, *2002 Marriage, Divorce, Suicide, Death Statistics* (Ankara: Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry, 2002).

⁷⁹ Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr," 478.

⁸⁰ "Population Marital Status," *All Russian Population Census* (Moscow: Statistika Rossii, 2002).

⁸¹ Only two of the female suicide terrorists from these groups were known to be married at the time they conducted the attack. See U.S. Agency for International Development, *Near East Lebanon* (Washington, DC: Office of Development Information and Utilization, 1981); Palestinian National Authority, *Health Status in Palestine* (Ramallah: Ministry of Health, 2003); Caldwell, *Marriage in Sri Lanka*, 108-10. Gunawardena found no evidence in her survey of female LTTE attackers that any of the women were married at the time of their attacks. Gunawardena, "Female Black Tigers," in *Female Suicide Terrorists*. In the case of the Sri Lankans, there is the possibility for reverse causality given the reports that the LTTE prohibits its members from marrying. Female LTTE members may face a choice between continuing their support for the group or renouncing their membership in order to look for a husband. Christopher Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 160.

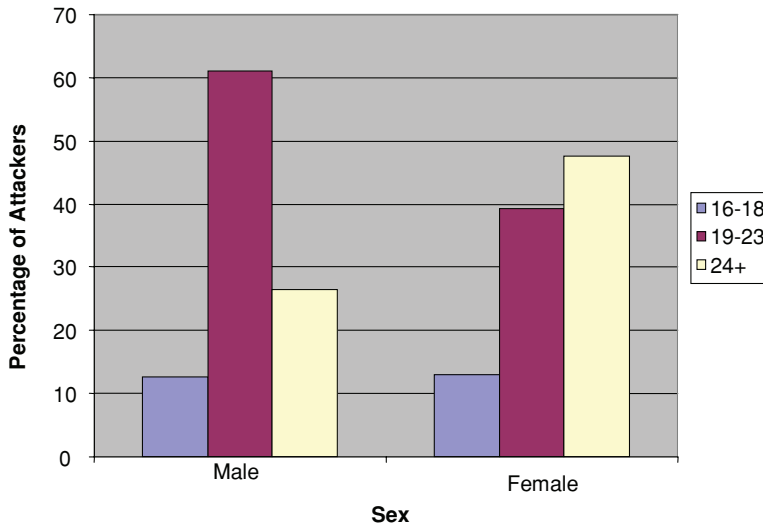


FIGURE 2 Age of Suicide Attackers by Sex.

rhetoric of some terrorist groups. While male Palestinian attackers are often promised seventy-two virginal wives in paradise, female attackers are now being offered a utopian conception of a woman's familial situation. Hamas's deceased spiritual leader Sheik Yassin claimed that, in paradise, female suicide bombers become "even more beautiful than the seventy-two virgins. If they are not married, they are guaranteed a pure husband in paradise, and of course they are entitled to bring seventy of their relatives to join them there without suffering the anguish of the grave."⁸² In a similar vein, the relatives of female suicide terrorists have thrown wedding celebrations in which local men were symbolically married to the attacker.⁸³ Female suicide terrorists were also immortalized with names reflecting the importance of marital status in their culture, such as the "Bride of Haifa" and "Bride of the South."⁸⁴

Finally, support for this hypothesis is provided by the statements of several failed female suicide terrorists.⁸⁵ In a prison interview, Ayat Allah Kamil, a failed Palestinian female attacker, said that in paradise, "[A] woman martyr will be in charge, the manager, the officer of the 72 virgins, the fairest of the fair."⁸⁶ Thouria Khamour, another Palestinian would-be attacker who was

⁸² Victor, *Army of Roses*, 112.

⁸³ Katherine VanderKaay, "Girls Interrupted: The Making of Female Palestinian Suicide Bombers," in *Terror in the Holy Land: Inside the Anguish of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Judy Kuriansky (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 18.

⁸⁴ Lisa Weeden, *Ambiguities of Domination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁸⁵ Would-be female suicide terrorists who were caught before they could successfully conduct their attack are not part of the dataset used in this paper. Nevertheless, and since we have reason to assume that their motivations were similar to those of successful female suicide attackers, I use their cases to shed light on the causal logic I advance.

⁸⁶ Anne Marie Oliver, "Brides of Paradise," *Salon.com* (20 July 2006).

arrested the day prior to committing her attack, cited her inability to get married and her parents' disapproval of her tom-boyish behavior as motives for her attack. "I was 25 years old, unmarried, and my situation at home wasn't good . . . I started returning to religion, wearing traditional clothing, and behaving like a girl. I very much wanted to get married."⁸⁷ Faiza 'Amal Juma'a, an unmarried thirty-five-year-old Palestinian, was intercepted en route to her attack. Faiza identified herself as transgender and was commonly known as Ahmad. As a justification for her attack, Faiza stated, "Only God knows whether I am really Faiza, as is written in my identity card, or Ahmad, which is who I feel I am . . . Who will want to marry someone like me? Have you forgotten that I am Ahmad?"⁸⁸

KILLING OF FAMILY MEMBER(S) IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CONFLICT

A second major demographic dissimilarity between male and female attackers is that female attackers are much more likely than men to have experienced the killing of a family member in the military conflict in which their group participates. Approximately one-third of female attackers fulfill this condition, while only nine of the 322 male attackers (2.8 percent) are known to have lost a family member.⁸⁹ Assuming that both genders equally grieve the killing of a relative, one would expect to find similar rates between male and female attackers. This abnormality, combined with an analysis of terrorist groups' rhetoric, suggests that the killing of a family member is being used discursively by these groups as tool to recruit female suicide attackers. This serves the dual purpose of increasing incentives for recruitment while highlighting the victimization of women in order to garner sympathy for the group's cause.

The Chechen insurgents have been the most vocal proponents of this norm. In fact, Chechen female attackers are known as the "Black Widows," reflecting the high percentage of attackers who have lost a husband in the military conflict. Consider the statement of Chechnya's rebel commander Abu al-Walid al-Ghamidi: "As you have seen and noticed, most of the suicide attacks were carried out by women. . . . These women, particularly the wives of the mujahedeen who were martyred, are being threatened in their homes, their *honour* and everything are being threatened. They do not accept being humiliated and living under occupation."⁹⁰ By framing the death

⁸⁷ Yoram Schweitzer, "Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Reality vs. Myth," in *Female Suicide Terrorists*, 32.

⁸⁸ Tzoreff, "The Palestinian Shahida," in *Female Suicide Terrorists*, 21.

⁸⁹ Pape, *Dying to Win*, 212. I am using the CPOST database for the relevant time period. Using a contingency table, this finding is statistically significant at the $P < .0001$ level with a Chi-Square score of 69.4.

⁹⁰ Abu al-Walid al-Ghamidi, quoted in "Commander Says Chechnya War to Spread to Rest of Russia," *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, 19 November 2003.

of a family member as a threat to the honor of Chechen women, terrorist leaders promote the norm that women should commit a suicide attack in order to demonstrate their commitment to the group. Speckhard's study of thirty-four male and female Chechen suicide terrorists found that a full 88 percent had experienced the death of an immediate family member in the Chechen-Russian conflict. In fact, 47 percent of the suicide attackers had more than one family member killed.⁹¹ Similar cultural norms have been promoted by several of the terrorist groups to attract female attackers.

OTHER DEVIATIONS

The remaining motivating factors include deviations from gender norms that have been cited as potential motivations by failed attackers, family members, the media, and several anthropologists. The goal of this section is to provide a theoretical justification for these variables and identify their potential scope.

In the societies from which female suicide attackers emerge, a high value is placed upon the marital fidelity and maternal role of women. These motivating factors refer to actions that either threatened the sexual honor of the woman or severely damaged her ability to raise a family. Women who realize they have deviated, intentionally or unintentionally, from these other behavioral gender norms of their society, may feel strong pressure to reaffirm their commitment to them. Given the personal nature of these variables and the fact that many do not apply to men, I cannot illustrate that there is a significant distinction between their prevalence within the biographies of male and female attackers. Rather, I hope to assess their prevalence within the biographies of female attackers and show that they are consistent with the logic of re-embracing gender norms.

Infertility is the first of these additional motivational factors. Being unable to bear children carries a strong social stigma in societies where women's roles are tied closely to the domestic sphere and is often considered a legitimate basis for divorce.⁹² Given the personal nature of this variable, biographical information to test this hypothesis is difficult to find. There are, however, at least three female bombers known to be infertile: two Chechens and one Palestinian.⁹³ This same motivation has been suggested by anthropologist Mangalika de Silva, who studies the intersection between nationalism and feminism within the Tamil community. "The self-sacrifice of the female bombers is almost an extension of idea of motherhood in Tamil culture . . . [I]n this strongly patriarchal society, Tamil mothers make great sacrifices for their sons on a daily basis, feeding them before themselves

⁹¹ Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr," 455.

⁹² Charlene Miall, "The Stigma of Involuntary Childlessness," *Social Problems* 33, no 4. (1986): 268–82.

⁹³ See Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr," 469; Victor, *Army of Roses*, 19–54.

or their girl children, serving them and so on. Acting as a human bomb is an understood and accepted offering for a woman who will never be a mother.”⁹⁴

Divorce can similarly threaten a woman's honor by suggesting that she is unable or unwilling to fulfill the expected gender norms.⁹⁵ Despite the relative infrequency of divorced women compared to married women in each of these societies, female suicide terrorists were more likely to be divorced than married at the time of their attack. Furthermore, both being caught having an affair and becoming pregnant out of wedlock are direct evidence of a woman's infidelity and thus a strong threat to her honor.⁹⁶ Amongst the female suicide bombers for whom there is biographical data, there are a handful of cases that fulfill these variables.

Rape has also been cited as a possible motivation for female suicide bombers in Chechnya, Sri Lanka, and Turkey. In societies with strong gender-specific norms regarding virginity and chastity, rape is not only a traumatic personal experience but also threatens the honor of a woman and jeopardizes her chances of having a family.⁹⁷ Several factors indicate that a desire for re-embracing norms, not a post-rape depression, serves as one form of motivation for rape victims to perpetrate a suicide attacks. These factors are the lapse of a significant period of time between the rape and the suicide attack, reports that the bomber was not depressed prior to her attack, and the promotion of re-embracing norm by the terrorist group.⁹⁸

In the Sri Lankan case, the hypothesis that rape is a motivation for female attackers is confirmed by several sources. First, reports link female attackers to both individual rape cases and mass rapes perpetrated in the context of the conflict. Both the Sri Lankan Army (controlled by the Sinhalese majority of the population) and the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) that occupied Sri Lanka from 1987 to 1990 are alleged to have committed mass rapes of Tamil women.⁹⁹ Second, failed female suicide attackers have mentioned rape

⁹⁴ Mangalika Silva, “Co-Ordinator Women for Peace,” quoted in Ana Cutter, “Tamil Tigresses, Hindu Martyrs,” *Journal of International Affairs* (1998).

⁹⁵ Welchmann and Hossain, *Honour: Crimes, Paradigms, and Violence against Women*, 273.

⁹⁶ See Faye Linda Wachs, “The Relevance of Honor in the Contemporary World: Honor and Power,” *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 13, no. 1 (March 2005); L. Abu Odeh, “Crimes of Honour and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies,” in *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*.

⁹⁷ Patricia Searles and Ronald Berger, eds., *Rape and Society: Readings on the Problem of Sexual Assault* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

⁹⁸ There are only two cases where enough biographical information is available to look into this question. These are Dhanu, who is discussed in the case studies below and Hiba Daraghme, who committed her attack five years after she was raped. Family members reported that, during the intervening period, Hiba became more religious and adhered closely to the traditional norms for women in her society. Victor, *Army of Roses*, 289–292.

⁹⁹ See K.M. De Silva, *Conflict and Violence in South Asia* (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2000), 237; World Organisation Against Torture, statement to UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, 50th Session, Geneva, Switzerland, August 1998.

as a motive.¹⁰⁰ Third, in a study of fourteen female LTTE members, seven cited rape as a general motivation to join the organization, and four mentioned rape as a personal reason to do so.¹⁰¹ Fourth, anecdotal evidence suggests that the LTTE actively promoted this norm. For instance, in 2002, three Tamil women reported to an aid organization they had been raped. Within days, the LTTE persuaded them to become suicide attackers in order “to recover the family honor of having sex with Sinhalese men.”¹⁰² Finally, the LTTE has made use of the rape of Tamil women by Sinhalese men in its propaganda, using the victims to justify terrorist attacks.¹⁰³ This demonstrates the link between personal motives and an organizational strategy of using women to highlight societal victimization.

The role of rape in the Chechen conflict is more ambiguous. Although many cases of Russian soldiers raping Chechen women have been documented and Russian media often assert that Chechen women are coerced through rape into committing their attacks, there is no direct evidence of any attacker having experienced rape in any of these circumstances.¹⁰⁴ Based upon these contradictory accounts, it is hard to discern what role rape plays as a motivation in the case of Chechen female attackers. The same can be said about the PKK. Turkish forces are reported as having raped significant numbers of Kurdish women in the context of the ethnic conflict of the 1980s and 1990s, either during combat operations or while in custody of the Turkish police.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, sexual violence against women during armed conflict alone should not be viewed as a sufficient condition for the emergence of FST. For instance, FST emerged in only four of the thirty-seven conflicts Jennifer Green identifies as including instances of “collective rape”; in only seven of the fifty-one conflicts Megan Bastick et al. identify as including sexual violence against women; and three of fifty-four civil wars Dara

¹⁰⁰ See Jan Goodwin, “When the Suicide Bomber is a Woman,” *Marie Claire* (August 2007); Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers*, 93–95.

¹⁰¹ Miranda Alison, “Cogs in the Wheel: Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,” *Civil Wars* 6, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 43.

¹⁰² Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, 164.

¹⁰³ Alisa Stack-O'Connor, “Lions, Tigers, and Freedom Birds: How and Why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Employs Women,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (2007): 55.

¹⁰⁴ On rapes perpetrated by Russian forces, see, for example, Human Rights Watch, “No Happiness Remains: Civilian Killings, Pillage, and Rape in Alkhan-Yurt, Chechnya,” *A Human Rights Watch Short Report* 12, no. 5 (2000): 26–27, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6a86d8.html> (accessed 10 September 2009). Also, former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, recounted stories of “mass killings, summary executions, rape, torture and pillage” from her 2000 trip to Chechnya. Yu K Nikolaev, *Chechnya Revisited* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003), 11. On Chechen rebels coercing women to commit attacks through rape, see Vic Groskop, “Chechnya’s Deadly Black Widows,” *New Statesmen* 133, no. 4704 (2004): 132 (2). Speckhard finds no evidence of this in her study of Chechen female bombers. Speckhard and Ahkmedova, “The Making of a Martyr,” 471.

¹⁰⁵ See *Turkey’s Shame: Sexual Violence Without Redress—the Plight of Kurdish Women—Trial Observation Report* (London: Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2003); Rachel Denber, “Case of Nuriye Kesbir, Letter to Dutch Ministry of Justice,” *Human Rights Watch*, 24 May 2004.

Cohen identifies as including gang rape attacks against women.¹⁰⁶ This suggests that to the extent that rape serves as an individual motivation, terrorist organizations are still necessary to provide the opportunity and normative justification for committing the ST attack.

In sum, particularly in instances where women have not been closely affiliated with the terrorist organization, one common individual motivation for female suicide attackers is to re-embrace societal norms about the behavior of women from which they believe they have (or are perceived by others as having) deviated. I argue that female suicide terrorists are not randomly selected by organizations: they are in fact carefully vetted. This is not to say that the same is not done for men, but the evidence for FST is particularly evident. There is no empirical evidence in support of the claim that resentment against these same societal norms is driving female attackers to commit FST acts. Nor is there any evidence that the psychological causes usually related to conventional suicide are behind the women's decisions. For those women who joined the group only a short time before their suicide attack (which includes members of Chechen insurgent groups, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Al-Qaeda), the group solidarity explanation also has little traction.

Five Female Attackers

To test my logic that female suicide attackers are embracing (rather than resenting) societal norms, I conduct five short case studies of individual attackers. These cases are representative of the universe of female suicide attackers who have biographical data available. If my hypothesis is correct, I would expect four findings: (1) female attackers should be well integrated into their society; (2) in the case they have violated the expected behavioral norms for women in their society, they should feel pressed to re-embrace such norms; (3) they should have no history of mental illness; and (4) the length of the attackers' membership in the terrorist group should vary. Testing for (1) and (2) enables me to evaluate both my re-embracing logic and the alternative resentment logic. Testing for (1) and (3) allows me to evaluate the psychological explanation for FST. Testing for (4) makes possible an evaluation of group solidarity as a motivation for FST. I summarize my results at the end of the cases.

¹⁰⁶ See Jennifer Lynn Green, "Collective Rape: A Cross-National Study of the Incidence and Perpetrators of Mass Political Sexual Violence, 1980-2003" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2006), http://www.ohiolink.edu/etd/view.cgi?acc_num=osu1153496251; Megan Bastick, Karin Grimm, and Rachel Kunz, *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflicts: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2007); Dara Kay Cohen, "The Causes of Sexual Violence by Insurgents During Civil War: Cross-National Evidence (1980-1999)," by request at <http://www.stanford.edu/~dkcohen/research.html>, (2008).

In 1985, the first known female suicide terrorist, seventeen-year-old Sana Mhaydali, committed her attack on behalf of the secular SSNP group, which she had joined one year earlier. She successfully targeted Israeli forces in Lebanon.¹⁰⁷ In her martyrdom video, Mhaydali declared, "How happy and pleased I am with this heroic martyrdom that I have offered. Please, I kiss your hands one by one don't cry for me, don't be sad for me, but be happy, laugh for the world as long as in it there are heroes and hopes for liberation. I with the detonators that made their flesh and dirt fly am a hero."¹⁰⁸ Although Israel claimed Mhaydali was pregnant at the time of her attack, her final statement does not suggest depression due to pregnancy was a motivation: "I am not dead. I walk with you. I sing. I dance. I fulfill my dream."¹⁰⁹ Finally, the Lebanese press cast her act as consistent with the gender-specific values of her society and granted her final wish to be immortalized as "The Bride of the South."¹¹⁰

In Sri Lanka, Thenmuli Rajaratnam ("Dhanu"), whose attack killed Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, was the first female LTTE suicide bomber and also the first suicide attacker ever to use an explosive vest. Dhanu's case fits several of the motivations I described above. She remained unmarried at age twenty-eight, allegedly had been gang-raped by the IPKF, and had four brothers killed in the conflict.¹¹¹ Furthermore, Dhanu did not appear to be suffering from debilitating mental illness (depression) prior to her attack.¹¹² Finally, since Dhanu joined LTTE several years before her attack, the group solidarity argument is most plausible for her case.

The first FST attack in Palestine was conducted by Wafa Idris on behalf of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. Idris fulfills three of the motivations I include in my argument. She was divorced by age thirty-one due to her infertility.¹¹³ Her mother remarked, "[M]y daughter's husband divorced her because she couldn't have children. Idris knew she could never marry again because a divorced woman is tainted. She was young, intelligent, and beautiful and had nothing to live for."¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, Idris was an active member of her society and cared deeply about the plight of the Palestinians, working as a paramedic for the Red Crescent Society. None of her friends observed

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Dickey, "Young Lebanese Seek New Martyrdom," *The Washington Post*, 12 May 1985.

¹⁰⁸ Sana Mhaydali's SSNP martyrdom video. I thank Sevag Kechichian for this translation.

¹⁰⁹ Edward Walsh, "From Suicide Recruit to Captive of Israel," *The Washington Post*, 18 June 1985; Roland Flamini, "Analysis: Women 'Martyrs' for the Cause," *United Press International*, 3 September 2004.

¹¹⁰ Weeden, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 62.

¹¹¹ Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers*, 93–95.

¹¹² She frequently went shopping, went to the cinema six times during the last twenty days of her life. Pape, *Dying to Win*, 226–30.

¹¹³ Victor, *Army of Roses* 19–54. Idris's friends recounted that she would lie about her age, suggesting that being unmarried at her age was a source of embarrassment (ibid., 3).

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 41.

behavior indicative of mental illness in the period preceding her attack.¹¹⁵ Idris committed her attack shortly after joining the organization.

Like most of the female Chechen attackers, twenty-two-year-old Ajsa Gasujewa experienced the killing of family members in the military conflict with the Russians. Russian commander Geidar Gadschijew—who became the target of her attack—bayoneted her husband before her eyes.¹¹⁶ Fourteen of Gasujewa's other relatives (including two brothers, one sister, several cousins and nephews) were also killed by Russian forces.¹¹⁷ In her case, there is no evidence that she was either suffering from psychological illness or was a long-term member of the terrorist group.

The only female suicide terrorist not from a society where women's roles are strongly associated with the domestic sphere, Belgian citizen Muriel Degauque, perpetrated her attack in Iraq. Degauque was thirty-eight years old when she did so. She was raised as a Catholic in Belgium. As a teenager, Degauque had a turbulent relationship with her parents and began using drugs. Soon after, she distanced herself from her family and became interested in Islam. She first married a Turkish immigrant and then remarried an Algerian man. Degauque's mother reported that she became "more Muslim than Muslim."¹¹⁸ In November 2005, Degauque traveled to Iraq with her husband and soon thereafter committed a joint attack against an American military patrol.¹¹⁹ There is no evidence she was mentally ill or a member of any terrorist group before then. If Degauque can be said to resent the gender norms of any society, it would be Western gender-neutral norms embraced by Belgium, not the gender-specific norms of Iraqi society. This case thus turns the resentment argument on its head.

All these cases provide support for my argument. Although there is no standard profile for a female suicide terrorist, the empirics conform to my arguments about group solidarity and re-embracing the norms that regulate gender behavior. With the exception of the partial support for the group solidarity argument in the LTTE case, none of the cases provide evidence in favor of the alternative explanations for the individual motives of female suicide terrorists.

¹¹⁵ Barbara Victor, "Equality in Death," *The Observer*, 25 April 2004.

¹¹⁶ Annette Langer, "Schwarze Witwen" *Spiegel Online*, (March 07, 2005). Gasujewa assassinated Gadschijew in June 2000. Moments before she detonated her explosives, she asked him, "Do you still know me?" Mainat Abduljewa, "Why They Murder: About the Chechen Terrorism," *Grosny*, 3 September 2004.

¹¹⁷ Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers*, 114.

¹¹⁸ "Journey of a Belgian female 'Bomber,'" *BBC News*, 12 December 2005. Degauque donned a head-to-tow chador, prevented her father from drinking alcohol, and refused to eat in the presence of men.

¹¹⁹ Craig Smith, "Raised as Catholic in Belgium, She Died as a Muslim Bomber," *The New York Times*, 6 December 2005.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To summarize the main points of my argument, FST is a particularly effective coercive strategy. Given this strategic value, secular groups first opted to employ female attackers. Religious groups later employed women in the same conflicts secular groups used FST first. To do so, both types of groups adapted their discourse, catering to the specific individual motives of potential female suicide attackers. The specificity of these individual motives derives from the gender-specific norms of the societies in which FST emerged. Women are likely to be motivated to commit acts of ST by their willingness to re-embrace social norms regulating female behavior in their societies of origin.¹²⁰

So how can states defend against the rising wave of female suicide attacks? One implication of my argument is that the evolution of FST depends on whether target states adapt their defensive strategies. If states targeted by female suicide attackers revise their policies to undermine women's advantages in achieving surprise and concealing explosives, we can expect the use of FST to decline, approaching that of ST in general. If, however, target states fail to develop gender-neutral counterterrorism policies, the tactical (and strategic) advantage of FST is likely to be sustained, leading to a continued increase in FST.¹²¹ Unfortunately, given the character of most societies targeted by FST (and ST in general), the chances that more effective counterterrorism measures will be applied to women are low for three reasons. First, counterterrorism efforts geared specifically toward women are often slow to emerge and develop. For instance, after five years of FST

¹²⁰ In addition to these empirical findings, my argument has one main theoretical contribution to offer to the specific literature on FST: it connects this literature to the broader debate on the causes of ST in general. Thus far, studies of FST have focused entirely on the individual motivations of attackers. This has prevented scholarship on the subject from understanding the broader strategic and organizational dynamics at play in FST. As I have demonstrated, strategic considerations are behind terrorist groups' endorsement of FST. Similarly, organizational dynamics—specifically, competition between religious and secular groups for the support of the same population—are behind the spread of FST across and within conflicts. The argument and evidence presented above enables us to understand the phenomenon of FST in a comprehensive way, encompassing its strategic, organizational, and individual aspects.

This also has consequences for the literature on ST more generally. First, I show how strategy leads to changes in ideology. Terrorist groups' willingness to achieve strategic goals leads these groups to adapt their organizations and discourse in order to maximize their chances of success. As part of this process of strategic adaptation, terrorist groups—secular ones first, then also religious ones—have included FST into their arsenal of weapons. Second, I illustrate the way in which ideological discourse is used as an interface between group strategy and individual motives. In particular, rhetoric about the role of each gender has been transformed in both secular and religious groups as a consequence of the superior effectiveness of FST, which lead both groups to resort to it. This displays the malleability of discourse, which contrasts with the fixity of strategic goals.

¹²¹ For instance, threats to deploy female bombers have been made by Al-Aqsa, Al-Qaeda, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and an Iranian group named Headquarters for Commemorating Martyrs of the Global Islamic Movement. See Christopher Dickey, "The Women of Al-Qaeda," *Newsweek*, 12 December 2005; Matthew Kalman, "The Suicide Sisters," *Daily Mail*, 22 May 2007; Brian Murphy, "Iranians Pledge to Become Suicide Bombers," *Associated Press*, 25 May 2006; UPI, "Palestinian Women Threaten Suicide Attacks," 26 April 2007.

attacks in Iraq, American officials started a "Daughters of Iraq" program to train Iraqi women to search for female attackers. The program, however, is very small; only about thirty women initially graduated from the course, and each is expected to work only a few days a month.¹²² Second, since a root cause of suicide terrorism appears to be anger at occupying forces, target states risk blowback if they are seen as trying to buy loyalty from local women.¹²³ For instance, according to Riyadh abu Mohammed, deputy commander of Adhamiya's 843 Sons of Iraq program, "In our culture, we can't have women standing in public on a checkpoint. It isn't good for us, for her or her family."¹²⁴ Third, the fact that religious groups changed their position on employing women attackers illustrates their willingness to develop new tactics to overcome security measures, thus efforts like the Daughters of Iraq are probably stopgap measures at best.

A second implication is of particular importance for U.S. foreign policy. If the goal of the state is to prevent FST, the best strategy would be to publicly commit to tolerance and the acceptance of cultural diversity regarding the role of women. Policies aimed at Westernizing the societies from which female suicide attackers emerge are unlikely to decrease FST in the short-term. As the literature on the strategic rationale of ST shows, such transformational policies are the source of numerous ST groups' grievances. My argument dovetails nicely with this strategic analysis by demonstrating how the individual motives of female suicide attackers are equally opposed to the substitution of traditional societal norms about the role of women for gender-neutral norms of Western feminist inspiration. For both organizational and individual reasons, transformational policies may well make FST worse.

So what is special about FST? First is its effectiveness. Second is the learning process through which terrorist organizations endorsed it. Third is its impact on terrorist group discourse regarding the role of women in the conflict. Finally, there are the gender-specific norms that terrorist organizations promote while trying to recruit women. But the most important point is that the particular character and effectiveness of FST depends on the norms regulating gender behavior in the societies from which female terrorists emerge and in which they perpetrate their attacks. Should states attempt to transform those norms, FST would lose its superior effectiveness. At the same time, though, trying to transform such norms would likely motivate more women to become suicide attackers. FST therefore leaves states in a Catch-22 situation.

¹²² Army Capt. Mike Starz, "Soldiers Help Create 'Daughters of Iraq' Program," American Forces Press Service, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 18 April 2008); "U.S. Trains Iraqi Women to find Female Suicide Bombers," *CNN*, 24 June 2008.

¹²³ On occupation as a root motivation for suicide terrorism, see Pape, *Dying to Win*.

¹²⁴ Riyadh abu Mohammed, quoted in Alexandra Zavis, "Daughters of Iraq: Women Take on a Security Role," *The Los Angeles Times*, 4 June 2008.