



# THE CHANGING FORMS OF INCITEMENT TO TERROR AND VIOLENCE: The Need for a New International Response

# THE SMARTER BOMB: WOMEN AND CHILDREN AS SUICIDE BOMBERS\*

*Anat Berko*

This article is based on over fifteen years of research in some of Israel's highest-security prisons, whose inmates include Palestinian security prisoners. The research included meetings with those responsible for operating and dispatching terrorists, with terrorists themselves, would-be suicide bombers, and leaders of terror organizations including Sheikh Ahmed Yassin (founder and leader of Hamas).

I spoke with all these people and saw women, their faces concealed by veils and wearing long robes, take center stage, well away from the watchful eyes of "big brothers," fathers, husbands, families—in effect "undressing" openly. When Ahlam Tamimi (an accomplice in the planning and execution of the 2001 bombing of the Sbarro pizzeria in Jerusalem) set out to carry out the attack she was not dressed in traditional attire, covered from head to toe. When women set out to perform an act of terror, they shed their usual modest garb and can often be seen wearing cut-off tank tops, tight pants, and heavy makeup so as to help them look more "Western." But that is not always a genuine Western look and sometimes they take the look, as they see it, with the blessing of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, to provocative extremes.

I have in my possession a letter written at my request by Nabil,<sup>1</sup> a terrorist dispatcher who was responsible for sending out, among others, suicide bomber Darin Abu Aisha, who blew herself up at Maccabim Junction in 2002. The letter was written at my suggestion, after many hours of interviewing, and gave Nabil an opportunity to express himself openly. He wrote:

My dearest Darin,

As I write this letter to you, my pen bears witness that I write all the sad and painful emotions in my heart about your bloody end and absence. If only I had the power to control fate, or if the wheels of history were within my control, I would turn the clock back and I would not agree to the idea of you dying a shahida [a martyr in Islam]. That is because you died while others are trading in your blood and the blood of other heroes like you. They destroyed your blood and your heroism on the streets of Gaza.

Nabil sent Darin out to blow herself up and wrote about how she was exploited and how her blood was commercialized; he himself was closely involved in many terror attacks, including those that used Muslim women for terrorist purposes. Nabil found a way to create apparently legitimate romantic connections with women in a society where having a relationship with any woman outside of marriage is taboo. He recruited and dispatched Darin, a pretty girl and an outstanding student. He may have thought to himself, "If I can't marry her...." In fact he was already married and in jail, his wife waiting for him on the outside, and he also carried

on a romantic relationship with another female prisoner,<sup>2</sup> so “why should Darin remain alive for another man to win her? Perhaps it was better for her to be dead than alive.”

And what was the very last thing that Darin Abu Aisha did before leaving to blow herself up at Maccabim Junction? She prepared dinner for Nabil, her operator, because, as he told me: “When a woman leaves the kitchen it is only to do something bad.” So he saw to it that she, Darin, should remain in the kitchen until her last moment. She made his dinner, then left to blow herself up. Nabil expressed remorse for the action, presumably on the grounds of some lingering sense of shame as the one who had “dispatched a woman” or had relationships out of wedlock.

## A WOMAN’S PLACE

The very first female suicide bomber, Wafa Idris, had been divorced for nine years at the time she carried out her attack. She had been married to her first cousin, gave birth to a stillborn baby and was told she would be unable to have any more, whereupon her husband/cousin divorced her under pressure from the family.<sup>3</sup> What is the value of a barren, divorced woman in Palestinian society? To many a divorcee is considered cheap and unprotected and this was the source of much pain for Wafa. She set off to blow herself up after her ex-husband/cousin had married another woman, who produced a child. She felt that her life was falling apart, and the anguish of her inability to attain love and motherhood drove her to carry out a suicidal act of terror.

There have been many cases where women martyred themselves to become a *shahida*. Today women are definitely in the forefront, with many female suicide bombers in other parts of the world too. There was even one in Afghanistan, and the phenomenon has also been seen among the Chechens, Kurds, and Tamils. The typical woman suicide bomber is one from a traditional society for whom some act within that society has resulted in her sexual oppression, making her incapable of expressing herself. Another profile could be a European woman who has converted to Islam pursuant to marriage with a Muslim immigrant or descendant of immigrants. The act of terror affords her some form of self-expression, if not in her lifetime then at least after her death. In addition, suicide attacks carried out by women attract widespread media coverage and further increase awareness of the struggle in whose name they are performed. Moreover, the inclusion of women underlines the power of grievances within the society that uses them and spurs men on to take further action.

But we also need to ask whether these women receive recognition within their own society. Are they really seen as heroic? Was Amana Muna,<sup>4</sup> on her release from prison, truly considered a heroine by the society around her? In fact, they see such women as having problems, as having been pushed by something into doing what they do. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the founder and leader of Hamas who was assassinated by Israel in 2004, told me in a one-on-one meeting in 1996<sup>5</sup> that the role of men is to engage in terrorism or, in his words, “military affairs,” while women have special potential—that is, to give birth, and that is what they should focus on. Amana Muna was exceptional in having initiated her attack herself, rather than being recruited by a male dispatcher.

Amana and Ahlam Tamimi fought with one another in jail over power struggles. According to the Hamas prisoners, Amana herself was responsible for injuring girls from Hamas and Islamic Jihad. She caused them to be severely burned by convincing other girls to throw boiling margarine mixed with sugar in their faces, and also to pour bleach in their eyes.

It was certain that in Gaza she would be duly repaid for those actions. Nor would she be allowed to wear tight jeans, but would be covered from head to toe in traditional long robes and *hijab* (veil). Hence on her release she was allowed instead to relocate to Turkey.

Sheikh Yassin altered his position in 2004 when Hamas member Reem al-Riyashi blew herself up at the Erez border crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip. On this occasion he found good reason to support her action on the grounds that she was suspected of immoral behavior, namely, having a romantic relationship with another Hamas member. Although this may have been an unfounded rumor, it sufficed in any case for a woman to carry out an act that would “purify” her and her family members. In other words, in many cases, rather than becoming the victim of an honor killing, or being suspected of immoral conduct, these women resort to an alternative that entails self-cleansing and purification.

What did the deputy head of Hamas think of all this? After Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was kidnapped in 2006, most of the Hamas members of parliament were arrested and incarcerated in Israeli jails. For some reason Israel released them in 2009, long before the release of Shalit. I met with those Hamas parliament members in jail; at the time of the interview (2007) Sheikh Muhammad Hassan Abu Tir was considered Hamas’s deputy prime minister. He told me, “A woman’s place is actually to tend to the injured in hospital, or in education, and certainly not to go and carry out an act like that”—that is, participate in an act of terror. As he insisted, “I wouldn’t even allow my daughter to go out and take part in a demonstration. And my son definitely would not marry ‘a woman like that’ who has been released from jail.”

So beyond the fact of her being a terrorist and whatever pushed her into that corner, she is also perceived as someone who “hung out with the rabble,” socialized with the guys on the street, a behavior that breaks a taboo and is utterly forbidden. Furthermore, she engaged in terror, to which end she inevitably had more contact with men. She even served time in an Israeli prison away from family supervision and is therefore considered “damaged goods,” because “who knows what happened to her in jail....”

Many women told me that from their point of view, they often had a greater sense of freedom in an Israeli jail than they did in their own Arab/Palestinian homes. They said they received better treatment in the Israeli prison and were often helped to find solutions to problems for which, at home, they would have been subjected to harm. At a time of mass killings against the background of Hamas-Fatah rivalry, the female security prisoners told me that “Israel never did to us what Hamas does or what we did to one another, with cruelty and murder on both sides. Rivers of Muslim blood were shed by Muslims.”

Abu Tir added, “Anyone who sends a woman out [to carry out an act of terror] is sick, he is a *jahil* [a derogatory term referring to the age of ignorance, before the rise of Islam], he is a boor....” Another Hamas member of parliament, Atun, said that: “A woman is like a diamond, she should be protected and not allowed to go out anywhere. No one throws a diamond out on the street, and our daughters should also be looked after and certainly not exposed to the sun. And if such a thing does happen and they set out on a suicide attack, then what actually takes place is harmful to the family. It is a weak family that removes its daughter from the fold to send her out and in fact makes use of her.”

This total control and gender-based oppression continue even after the woman’s death because, from society’s point of view, if a woman blows herself up she exposes her nakedness. How could a woman expose her body parts to the public? If her body explodes then “her flesh

is on view, and how can the sight of the flesh [i.e. the naked body] of a woman be tolerated?" In other words, even after blowing herself up she is considered sinful, because even her dead body is still controlled.

In my book *The Smarter Bomb: Women and Children as Suicide Bombers*<sup>6</sup> I refer to this phenomenon as "striptease for bombing." The female suicide bomber sets out to perform an act of terror, thus exposing her body in Western attire that is often even more revealing than that of a conventional Western woman, so as to achieve what they themselves refer to as the "Western look." Not only does she have to walk around in revealing clothes on her way to the attack, but once she actually blows herself up Palestinian society considers her to have undressed completely in public.

At my request, one female suicide bomber drew her own self-portrait, a sketch that could be discussed at length and serves as an excellent illustration of her self-perception. The portrait itself contains enough material to merit a whole separate analysis.<sup>7</sup> The artist was not a five-year-old girl but a young woman of twenty-one, a university graduate, and the portrait shows such an introverted body image that the body is depicted as a box closed over concealed female body parts. It shows no femininity; it is repressed and blocked, any emphasis on femininity being shameful.

As for Nabil, the terrorist dispatcher who sent Darin Abu Aisha to her death, while visiting the family of a different suicide bomber whom he also sent to blow himself up in Tel Aviv, he went even further by recruiting that man's sister for another suicide bombing. A few smiles sufficed, a romance developed, and she became his new lover. Israeli soldiers arrested them together in their hiding place, and in the course of the arrest she pretended to be Nabil's wife. They then continued their romantic relationship while in jail; it eventually ended at Nabil's initiative when his real wife threatened to leave him, but while it lasted it sustained the pair in jail.

## INCENTIVES FOR "MARTYRDOM"

Israeli jails are stimulating places. The state of Israel enables terrorists to acquire an education via the Open University, whether in academic studies or a preparatory course for school matriculation. Good relations develop between male and female prisoners who manage to maintain some degree of romantic tension, expressed in smiles, messages, secret exchanges of letters, all helping them feel that their lives are continuing even while imprisoned.

Female security prisoners say, "If a girl makes a mistake"—usually meaning a premarital sexual relationship or even a rumor of a sexual relationship—"she must pay for it." They are often referring to themselves and by "payment" they mean performing an act of terror (or being murdered in an honor killing). In many cases, sometimes before a female suicide bomber is dispatched she is also subjected to sexual exploitation and told, "You are going to die anyway, so why not...in Paradise you'll be a virgin again, so there's no problem."

Girls who reported being beaten or otherwise hurt at home—by incest, or by being forced to marry against their will, for instance—have run away and offered themselves for suicide attacks, or arrived at a border crossing carrying a knife and asked IDF soldiers to arrest them so as to escape their dangerous home background. One terrorist from the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) told me that "an operation to repair virginity



is lifesaving surgery,” and that in her experience “in an Arab home the father oppresses the mother and the mother takes out her anger on her daughter. The mother is helpless to do anything because in the home the father is ‘God’ [‘Allah’] and opposing him is out of the question.”

And what does a female suicide bomber believe awaits her in Paradise? She is promised everything she does not have in this world: not only eternal virginity, but a skin of such whiteness and delicacy as to make blood vessels visible through it, and a hymen that heals itself after every sexual contact. Other rewards are promised to women as well. Unlike men who are led to expect seventy-two virgins in Paradise, women are unable to say “we expect seventy-two men.” What they can say is that they may expect “that thing”—referring to sex. And not only sex with people from this world, but with people from throughout the Islamic pantheon over the past two hundred, even three hundred years or more, when encounters were really exciting.

What will such virgins do? Older women will revert to being young, young women will be virgins for all eternity. If they were married they will meet up again with their husbands, though of course this is not always what they wish for. If the husband beheaded them or meted out some other form of brutal punishment, they will surely have no desire to meet him again in Paradise.

But in any event they will see the face of Allah, the face of the Prophet Muhammad. There will be no more physiological needs, no need to go to the bathroom, no monthly menstrual cycle; they will be available for sexual activity at any given moment. Yet at the same time they will remain virgins, and in the eyes of these terrorists or potential terrorists, the value of virginity both for women and for family members, and for this society as a whole, is greater than that of life itself.

What about young Palestinian men and boys who are involved in terror attacks? Their dispatchers and operators hand out empty promises, such as: “Go out there and perform an attack and we will make sure to get you out of trouble. Israelis act according to Western law, which is lenient to minors, and there won’t be any problem. You’ll have a one- or two-year sentence and maybe you’ll finish your high school diploma in jail and then everything will be all right.”

In one example, a youth with an average school grade of 50 knew that he had no chance of graduating from school. Once he was sent to an Israeli prison, however, the Palestinian examiners there raised his grades to enable him to complete his high school work there (under far superior conditions) so as to obtain a coveted Jordanian/Palestinian matriculation diploma.

The following is a summary of the boy’s own testimony in court:

- » **Defense attorney:** What grade are you in?
- » **Defendant:** Twelfth grade.
- » **Defense attorney:** What is your average school grade?
- » **Defendant:** 50.
- » **Defense attorney:** Why did you turn yourself in?
- » **Defendant:** I had a problem in school, I was excluded from school, I don’t know what I did and I was afraid of my dad. I thought about going away somewhere else, but I had no

money. So I decided to turn myself in.

» **Defense attorney:** What does your dad do?

» **Defendant:** He's a doctor.

» **Defense attorney:** Can't you take the matriculation exam in your village?

» **Defendant:** No, I am well below standard in school.

» **Defense attorney:** And where did you want to take the exam?

» **Defendant:** In jail.

His previous poor school record was thus transformed into a desirable high school diploma, a success that merely boosted his motivation to go out and commit more terror attacks.

One aspect that is not much spoken about, however, is the great damage wrought on youngsters and children by the planners of Palestinian terror attacks. These children are victims who are quite simply exploited and misled. The first underage potential suicide bomber was a fifteen-year-old boy with a stammer, whose divorcee sister later also offered her own services as a suicide bomber. Thus we see a family pattern repeating itself. The young boy pulled the wires as instructed to detonate his explosives, pulled and pulled again, but the bomb failed to explode.

He later told me: "I was exploited and in fact there was no reason not to exploit me." Like other youths I spoke with, this boy dreamed of the virgins who would be waiting for him in Paradise: "I am a virgin too, and I would meet other virgins." In other words, virgin girls are offered to virgin boys, presumed to be awaiting them in Paradise. This boy's sole desire was to blow himself up: "Once I pressed that button I would go straight to Paradise. I believed that dark-eyed virgins would be waiting for me there, '*banat*' ['girls'].... I never had a relationship with a woman. I was young and knew nothing about such things."

But this particular scenario ended somewhat differently and instead he headed straight to an Israeli jail.

The opinions of young male terrorists on women who are recruited to carry out attacks are equally interesting: "Even young people talk of this being an act forbidden to women. It is unthinkable for a girl to do that. A girl who carries out a suicide attack is not a good person, she is bad and no one will want to marry her." There is actually a conspiracy of silence, an unwillingness to talk about why a girl carried out an attack, the real reasons that led her to it. The recognition she will receive from Palestinian society will be no more than superficial. Negative discrimination applies even to payments (in the form of a pension) to the families of "martyrs," with women's families receiving a smaller amount than men's. In Palestinian society the value of a woman is simply lower, and that is not changed by the act she performed. Hence (according to Barbara Victor)<sup>8</sup> the families do not receive equal compensation, which further reinforces the idea that far from being a form of feminist revolution, this is merely another form of oppression of women.

There is a polarized element in social attitudes toward women in Palestinian Arab society: on the one hand, they are restricted to the confines of personal and family space; on the other, they are recruited to carry out attacks that result in their "naked" body parts being openly exposed to public view. Inside the prisons rivalry abounded between women belonging to Hamas and to Fatah. Amana Muna objected to being sent to Gaza after her release from jail as part of the Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange deal; she knew she would be less warmly received there than other released prisoners.

## THE GROWING DANGER

I propose a new term for the phenomenon of suicide attacks: *shahidamania*, that is, a kind of mania to achieve martyrdom (*istishahad*) in the attacker's eyes. The phenomenon is not exclusive to Israel and Palestinians but worldwide, and damages not only the Western world but in particular Muslims and their societies. Osama bin Laden did not recruit his own sons for the mass attack of September 11, nor did Sheikh al-Qaradawi (the Kuwait-based leader of the Muslim Brotherhood) send his sons to blow up the Twin Towers, despite urging other young men to participate in the jihad with promises of the usual rewards in Paradise. We did not see Sheikh Yassin, founder and leader of Hamas, use his children for the cause, nor current Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh. The preference is always to use other people's children.

As for women, there is a genuine prospect of a woman in traditional garb and head-covering boarding an airplane with explosives embedded in tampons. Today there is talk of implanting explosives into a terrorist's body by surgical means. A woman could conceivably board an aircraft with explosive tampons inserted into her vagina and detonate herself inside the plane. Who would be able to identify the explosives in a body search? What warning can there be of such an occurrence?

We are now facing a very real challenge. Women are not examined as thoroughly as they should be at border crossings; they benefit from a more tolerant and chivalrous approach. Women and children provide excellent camouflage for an attack, for who would suspect what appears to be a normative family group sitting in a car accompanying someone who is in fact a suicide bomber? And who would suspect someone with a baby in a car, only to find later that this person has no qualms about blowing up the car with the baby in it? These are all terror attacks that actually take place today in our region and others around the world.

Are female suicide bombers in fact "smart bombs," or are they perhaps foolish, stupid bombs? The clear message being transmitted in Palestinian society is one of living altruistically in this world and hedonistically in the next.

**Dr. Anat Berko** (Lt. Col., res.), a world-renowned terrorism expert whose research focuses on suicide bombers and their handlers, conducts research for Israel's Counter-Terrorism Team and Israel's National Security Council, and serves as an adviser to senior government officials. A visiting professor at George Washington University, Dr. Berko is a research fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya.



## ENDNOTES

\* This article is excerpted from Anat Berko, *The Smarter Bomb: Women and Children as Suicide Bombers* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth Press, 2010 [in Hebrew; due for publication in English in November 2012 by Rowman & Littlefield]).

The lecture was translated from Hebrew by Marian Shay.

- 1 The names of a few interview subjects were changed to protect their privacy and enable them to speak freely.
- 2 Such relationships in the prison context were of an emotional nature only, with no direct physical contact. Detainees might occasionally find a possibility of exchanging notes, seeing one another in a military courtroom, or other distant contact, but they perceived such relationships as romantic.
- 3 Paige Whaley Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists: Women and Political Violence* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 188-189.
- 4 Amana Muna lured Israeli teenager Ofir Rahum to his death in Ramallah and was jailed for life in 2003. She was later released as part of the Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange deal. Fearing reprisals from Hamas and the families of other prisoners to whom she caused physical and/or emotional harm in jail, she resisted deportation to the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip and was eventually sent to Turkey.
- 5 Anat Berko, *The Path to Paradise: The Inner World of Suicide Bombers and Their Dispatchers* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth Press, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2010 [in Hebrew; in English by Praeger, Potomac; in Polish by Axis/Replika]).
- 6 Anat Berko, *The Smarter Bomb: Women and Children as Suicide Bombers* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth Press, 2010 [in Hebrew; due for publication in English in November 2012 by Rowman & Littlefield]).
- 7 The self-portrait is reproduced in *ibid.*
- 8 Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2003).