

'Bombshell' explodes myths of female terrorist motivation

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Often portrayed as pawns of male-dominated terrorist organizations, female terrorists are actually motivated by more complicated and diverse reasons, according to a Penn State researcher.

"It's true that some women are coerced, but the truth is that motivations vary from terrorist group to terrorist group," said Mia Bloom, fellow, International Center for the Study of Terrorism. "For example, of the women in the provincial Irish Republican Army group that I talked to, not one was coerced; they were enthusiastic about their roles."

Bloom, who examined female participation in the world's most recognized terrorist groups in her book, "Bombshell: The Many Faces of Female Terrorists" (Viking Canada 2011), said there are five main reasons why females resort to acts of terrorism and [suicide bombings](#) -- revenge, redemption, relationship, respect and rape.

"Relationship, the third R, is particularly crucial in understanding how women are mobilized," Bloom writes. "The best single predictor that a woman will engage in terrorist violence is her relationship with a known insurgent or jihadi."

According to Bloom, leaders of terrorist groups encourage female participation in their organizations for several reasons. Women are more effective at attracting media attention. They are also held up as an example to goad males into joining with or increasing their participation in terrorist movements.

"Groups have found it very effective to use women as propaganda tools, especially to appeal to men," Bloom said. "The message is if you don't step up, you're not a man."

Bloom also said the level of participation in a terrorist group changes from culture to culture and from group to group. In some terrorist organizations, women assume leadership positions and take part in all aspects of operations. For example, Ah-lam al-Tamimi, a member of Hamas, planned one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in the history of Israel.

"Some terrorist groups go as far as addressing the roles for females in their founding documents," said Bloom.

For other [terrorist](#) groups, women are relegated to the lowest status of the organization and used as cannon fodder and, because of their ability to avoid suspicion in civilian areas, as suicide bombers on city streets.

"The truly deplorable thing about female suicide bombing is that in many cases women are usually selected to attack civilian targets, or 'soft targets,' " said Bloom. "So women are being used to kill other women and children."

Bloom recommends blunting the lure of terrorism for females by exposing the true nature of the groups in a process she refers to as "deglamorizing, demobilizing and delegitimizing terrorism."

"This part of the book has to do with the work we do here at the center," said Bloom. "We look for ways to get people to leave terrorism."

She began writing the book about three years ago after writing a chapter on female suicide bombers in her previous book, "Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror." As she further researched female terrorists,

Bloom realized that her source's conclusion that most female terrorists were coerced was simplistic.

"I actually wrote the book as a corrective," Bloom said. "I started to realize that I mischaracterized [women](#) as merely pawns in these organizations."

The University of Pennsylvania Press plans to publish the book in the U.S. in fall, 2011.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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