



“Playground explosions” in Afghanistan: The use of children in suicide attack operations

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The news have been indeed shocking: According to the Afghan authorities, an 8-year-old girl in central Afghanistan appears to have been used for carrying a bomb wrapped in cloth that was detonated remotely when she was close to a police vehicle¹. It is argued by the authorities that the little girl acted in good faith and knew nothing about the deadly package she was carrying.² Also the group behind the attack is still not identified.³

First, it is very important to investigate carefully whether indeed the child was unaware of carrying an explosive device that would be detonated while still in its possession. If this is not the case and the girl was knowingly carrying out a suicide attack, then we could be facing an alarming new trend of children martyrdom. Recently another similar incident is reported to have taken place, in Pakistan this time, where the police claim to have defused a bomb strapped to a 9 year old girl, previously abducted and instructed to recite the Quran until pushing the detonation button.⁴

A brigade of “minor martyrs” would mean indoctrination, radicalization and recruitment processes targeting the most tender and weak members of society. Of course the following also should be noted: in both cases mentioned above, the minors used in order to carry the bombs were girls. Was this a coincidence? Given the strong patriarchal system existing in both social environments (Afghanistan and Pakistan), one cannot but wonder if girls were chosen, not only because of their presumed innocence (a combination of gender and age), but also because they are more expendable. In traditional societies women do not participate in production, leadership and decision making; families celebrate the birth of sons, but grieve the birth of daughters. Could it be that in such settings sacrificing girls for the cause can horribly be regarded by groups scheduling suicide operations as a lesser evil than sacrificing boys? Still, regardless of the “mens rea” and gender implications of the bomb carrier, the bigger issue remains the unacceptable use of children in bombing attacks.

Women suicide bombers have left their undeniable strong mark in the evolution of suicide operation history in the Russian-Chechen and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Furthermore, groups in many countries (the Tamil Tigers, the PKK, etc) have used female suicide bombers. One of the reason women were recruited for such operations was the surprise element, due to their perceived innocence (a result of years in stereotyping female character as peaceful, naïve, submissive and unable to do harm, especially in social settings where there is male dominance).⁵ If women are assumed to be innocent, in the case of children their very existence is almost synonymous to innocence. Thus, given the successful female precedence, one cannot but wonder, if now the new deadly trend could really be the exploitation of child innocence in suicide operations. Certainly exploiting minors in conflict violence is not a new phenomenon. Unfortunately children have been used in battlefields in many ways. They have been abducted by their homes and recruited to bear arms during the civil war in Sierra Leone

¹The data and description of the facts are drawn from the following article http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/27/world/asia/27afghanistan.html?_r=1

² <http://www.news24.com/World/News/Afghan-girl-dies-carrying-bomb-for-insurgents-20110626>

³The Taliban deny recruiting children, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13919946> and <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/NewsDetails/tabid/96/smld/414/ArticleID/170807/reftab/36/t/Eight-year-old-Afghan-girl-dies-carrying-a-bomb-for-insurgents/Default.aspx>

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/26/afghanistan-taliban-girl-bomb-police>

⁵ Of course the phenomenon of female suicide attackers is a complex one and its analysis requires taking in to account many social parameters and pull factors.

and Colombia⁶. Groups like the Tamil Tigers have been accused of using them⁷ as well as the Khmer Rouge⁸ and many others.

International law prohibits the use of children under the age of 15 in war by armed groups (regardless if the armed groups belong to an official state or they are non-state groups of combatants). According to article 38, paragraph 2 of the "UN Convention on the Rights of the Child"⁹: "State parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take a direct part in hostilities." In 2002 the "Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict" raised even more the international standards of protection by outlawing the involvement of children under age 18 in hostilities.¹⁰ In addition, according to Article 8 paragraph 2 xxvi of the "Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court": "Conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into the national armed forces or using them to participate actively in hostilities" is a war crime.¹¹ The international legal community has strived to protect children from every hardship not fitting their age, especially taking part in war¹². It has tried to protect them from been used as labour force, let alone from been used as battle force (and in the case of suicide operation as parts of an explosive device).

Unfortunately the reality of children exploitation is very different from the aspirations of legal conventions.¹³ In many places in the world, where there is poverty parents will use children even in degrading jobs and where there are conflicts armed groups will use children as part of their combatant tactics. There are many aspects to be taken into account for children taking part in hostilities. Apart from compulsory recruitment and abductions, voluntarily recruitment is also problematic. How can someone call "volunteer to death" a child that knows yet nothing of life? Childhood is the most sensitive age, when human creatures still develop their personalities, they have no experience and they are easily molded and influenced. The desire or consent of a minor to assist as perpetrator on a suicide attack cannot be considered as valid and it does not give permission to armed groups to use children as human bombs.

In many cases, the cultural toolkit of religion, an inherent part of bringing up children in traditional Muslim societies, must not be overlooked as a parameter that influences children to participate in military operations, even in suicide attacks. It would make sense for children to aspire to become "shahids", the same way they aspire to be football and movie stars in western societies. One must examine societies according to their own special cultural norms and values, as well as the crisis and difficulties they face. The military and combatant interpretation of Islam and Jihad answers to the present challenge many Muslim people face; the circumstance of fighting those they perceive as enemy intruders of different culture and religion. Thus, it would not be strange for children to wish to become national heroes serving both their land and God, since this seems to be the present call and struggle of their people.

Conflict and violence remain the way grown ups actually fail to solve their differences effectively. By definition war is evil, hurtful and damaging. War means death, injury, destruction. It is the most cruel game adults play and usually there are no real winners; everybody loses. Let's keep the children out of this game and not use them as "jokers" in "combat poker". Suicide operations are not part of children's playground.

⁶ For Colombia, but also a very detailed report on the usage of children in war violence, see "Child Soldiers, The Shadow Of Their Existence, <http://cms2.warchild.nl/uploadedfiles/origineel/1182.pdf>

⁷ http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/terroristoutfits/child_soldiers.htm

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_use_of_children

⁹ <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/childsoldiers.pdf>

¹¹ http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Rome_Statute_of_the_International_Criminal_Court#Article_8_-_War_crimes

¹² The [Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers](http://www.warchild.org) works intensively for this purpose. The organization publishes reports on the use of children for military purposes. For more on the same issue, see War Child Network <http://www.warchild.org>

¹³ <http://www.un.org/rights/concerns.htm>