



Pakistani women and jihad: a new dangerous trend

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The recent suicide attack and bombing against the return of Benazir Bhutto have brought Pakistan in the spotlight. Unfortunately this tragic incident highlights the radicalization process taking place in the country. What is quite surprisingly is that the jihadi socialization mechanisms have started to include women too.

Radicalized women in Pakistan are increasingly being used by jihadist groups to promote their extremist cause. This year, women from the Jamia Hafsa seminary wearing burqas protested in front of the Lal Masjid (the "Red Mosque", known for training and funding the holy warriors of the Afghan jihad), seem to be the off start of an alarming and dangerous trend.

Women in "niqaab" (the ultra-conservative Muslim women's dress which hides everything but a woman's eyes) have threatened to commit suicide attacks unless Pakistan accepts their demands. According to the women, "*We are ready to give our lives for our religion. If any commando action is taken, it will be retaliated. We are ready for Feda attacks*"¹). Among their demands, stands prominent the call for the release of imprisoned terrorist Khalid Khawaja, a former Pakistani intelligence officer with links to the Taliban and Osama bin Laden².

Thus, a question is posed: How come women, who live in a strong patriarchal environment with until now an auxiliary role in jihad, have become radical and dominate centre stage in Pakistan? The "Talibanization" of women in Pakistan occurred years ago. During the Afghan resistance, while men were away to fight on the battlefield, women played key roles as mothers, daughters and wives of the male jihadists, providing logistical and facilitation support. Like the women supporting the Afghan jihad, the Jamia Hafsa women are claiming today their right to conduct suicide attacks against those who are- according to their views- acting against Islam.

This is not something new, as Muslim women fighting alongside Muslim men in other conflicts along the Islamic world also share the same spirit of jihad. They include Palestinian, Chechen, recently even European Muslim converts. In most cases, participation in violent acts is partly the result of the women's sense of dedication to the cause as well as family connections to male jihadists. Muslim women proudly declare that they are freedom fighters too and have the same rights as Muslim men to die for the cause and attain the rewards of martyrdom in Heaven³.

The emerging trend of women being motivated to enter jihad in Pakistan can also be traced to female-only "dars" (religious gatherings) across the country. The spread of jihad ideology in these private, female-only gatherings encourages women to adopt

¹ Daily Times, February 2 2007.

² South Asian Analysis Group, March 30 2007.

³ Of course we must keep in mind some reservations, on the social pull factors behind this volunteering of women. For example in the Chechen or the Palestinian case, it is argued that women are forced in jihad to elevate their social status in circumstances, when they face serious honor problems that can result to their exclusion from the social settings.

ultra-conservative Islamic perceptions and to reject Western influences. Across the country, these views are beginning to appeal to women and their allure can be explained in part by the U.S. "war on terrorism" and Iraqi invasion that has created resentment across the Muslim world.

There are also women members of the group Lashkar-e-Toiba (affiliated with al-Qaeda), in the Lashkar's Women Brigade, for which media reports have spoken about a training camp in northern Pakistan⁴. Religious extremists, leaders of madaras and jihadi organizations are increasingly using women as a tool of nationalism to support their rise to political power. Male jihadi leaders manipulate women to win political attention and public sympathy. Also, by using women, they are able to keep secret their activities and whereabouts from the authorities. Women are the ultimate cover-up, as they can conceal their identities by hiding their faces in burqa and are untouched by male officers.

The women of Jamia Hafsa is a hard to deal with problem. Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has stated: "*These few thousand girls are misguided. These misguided women wish to run the government though they know nothing... We don't want to kill them. We want to solve this issue with wisdom*"⁵ and the Pakistani government has denounced the threats about suicide attacks if the state launched an operation against the madrassas⁶.

The fact that male jihadis could drive these women to become suicide bombers has serious implications. Though we cannot be sure of their operational capability, Pakistan's radical women can pose a threat to civil society, law and order, stability and the survival of moderate and liberal Islam in Pakistan.

⁴ Times of India, April 6 2007.

⁵ Daily Times, April 8 2007.

⁶ Daily Times, April 7.