The Women of Tamil Tigers and Hamas: Female Militancy and Counterterrorism

Apekshya Prasai, Class of 2016

The emergence of women as suicide bombers in various conflicts across the world is a disturbing and puzzling phenomenon. While women have always engaged in war, historically their role has been limited to supportive roles such as nurses, drivers, messengers etc. Marking a departure from the conventional understanding of war as a masculine business, in the past few decades we have seen groups like the Maoists in Nepal, Shining Path in Peru, Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) in Nicaragua and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka recruit women in their military ranks in command and combat capacities. Such active participation of women in conflict raises questions about the traditional dichotomy that deems men to be the perpetrators and women to be the victims of war (Kampwirth, 2002). Such conventional wisdom that associates femininity with motherhood, life, selflessness, sacrifice, domesticity, pacifism and peace is further challenged by the engagement of women in the ultimate form of violence: suicide bombing. After all, one cannot go further than willingly exploding ones body in order to inflict damage and causalities against ones perceived enemy (Bloom, 2012).

While not discrediting the victimization of women in the context of conflicts, the participation of women in perpetuation of lethal and violent attacks, often against civilian populations, suggests a need to consider an alternative framework to understand the experiences of women in conflict: one which is willing to extend beyond the narrative of victimhood to account for the experiences of a sub-set of the female population in conflict zones who are participating in the perpetuation of violence. In an attempt to develop this framework to further understand the links between women and militancy, especially their utility in the battlefield, I spent the summer analyzing the issue of gender and militancy. I found myself discovering new details and grappling with new concepts; and ended up going beyond my initial idea of limiting the comparison to female suicide bombers of the Tamil Tigers and Hamas to include other groups like the Maoists in Nepal and the Hindu Nationalists in India, which have mobilized women in capacities other than suicide bombers (Manchanda, 2001; Basu, 1993). I also decided to analyze the gender policies of the Taliban in Afghanistan as a case where women were prohibited from participating in the militancy (Skaine, 2002). Comparing how women are used (or not) in these militant movements has reaffirmed my convictions that participation of women in militancy is a phenomenon that needs to be studied in greater depth and has given me tremendous insight and background knowledge about issues surrounding gender and militancy.

Two weeks remaining in my fellowship, I will be using this insight and foundational knowledge to develop a framework to understand women’s utility in organized political violence perpetuated by non-state actors through the lens of suicide bombing. I will continue this process of investigating how gender interacts with militancy by exploring the phenomenon of female suicide bombing, particularly the tactical and strategic utility of female suicide bombers and how this compares to that of their male counterparts.

References

Faculty Mentor: Barbara Elias
Funded by the: Breckenridge Fellowship