Female Suicide Bombers
Recognizing media’s gendered descriptions of women’s violence

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Human Rights Studies
Autumn 2011

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Abstract

Female suicide bombers are commonly described, by media and scholars, as having their actions motivated by personal reasons. These reasons usually include divorce, a wish to avenge dead male relatives or being traumatized by experiencing too much violence. This thesis serves to challenge the perception of women being driven to suicide bombings by personal, rather than political reasons. This is done by examining portrayals of Palestinian female suicide bombers in articles published in the New York Times, the Guardian and Haaretz, - in order to recognize and highlight narratives which trivialize female violence. This is done with the help of Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry’s theory of how violent women are defined by the media as mothers, monsters and whores. Nira Yuval-Davies perspective of how women are viewed as a socially constructed collective is also helpful in order to uncover ways of portraying female suicide bombers in a more nuanced way. The analysis of the newspaper articles reviewed in this study shows signs of these women being portrayed through the use of a gendered, generalizing discourse. The possibility of them blowing themselves up as political actors is left unmentioned, which effectively excludes the female suicide bombers’ voices from global politics.
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1 Introduction

Female suicide bombers are interesting in many ways. Not just because of the attention they receive from journalists and news presenters, but also because of the position these women have in the societies from within which they operate. How come organizations send women to blow themselves up, alongside men, when they have not yet achieved equal political empowerment in their everyday lives? How do the narratives describing female suicide bombers, and their motives, differ from the ones describing men? After doing some research, I found that portrayals of female suicide bombers often construct an image of them as emotionally distressed or psychologically damaged. They are also, by many writers, defined by their marital status and (potential) motherhood - which seems to create a stereotype of them as troubled women, rather than political actors. This thesis examines three major newspapers in order to illustrate how gendered discourse can be used to exclude violent women from international politics.

1.1 Purpose of Study

The specific question I attempt to answer in this thesis is the following: how are gendered descriptions of female suicide bombers constructed in articles from the New York Times, the Guardian and Haaretz? Towards the end of this study I also explore what political value – if any – is given the actions of female suicide bombers, based on the portrayals in the newspaper articles.

1.2 Delimitations

My purpose is not to find out why these women choose their actions, but to study how they are viewed when they resort to the violence of suicide bombings. I do not attempt to uncover any “truth” about these women’s lives – instead I focus only on examining the structures of how they are portrayed and perceived after they have gone.
1.3 Theory

In order to achieve my purpose of study, I will use Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry’s theory of how violent women are commonly portrayed in the context of global politics. Sjoberg and Gentry have developed three models – the mother, the monster and the whore – which, they argue, summarize the different attributes given violent women in media portrayals. The mother, the monster and the whore are constructed as opposite alternatives to the stereotype of the “ideal” woman. The “ideal” or “normal” woman is the one which is presumed to be gentle, peace-loving, a good wife and a loving mother. The mother narrative describing suicide bombers twists maternity into something violent – where women are portrayed as committing crimes out of maternal disappointments. The monster narrative serves to describe violent women as evil by nature and psychologically damaged. Portraying suicide bombers in this way robs them of their humanity and sets them apart from the stereotype of the “ideal” woman. Lastly, describing a female suicide bomber according to the whore narrative creates an image of her violence being sexualized. She may also be described as a victim of sexual dysfunctions - or simply as having a prominent sexual appetite. I will apply this theory on articles from three different newspapers, in order to discover signs of these types of gendered narratives being used to describe female suicide bombers. I will go into a more detailed explanation of the mother, monster and whore narratives, in relation to the subject of Palestinian female suicide bombers, in chapter 2.4.

To further illustrate how violent women are described as separate from the stereotype of the “ideal” woman, I have chosen to use Maggie Wykes’ theory about media’s construction of an “anti-woman”. Wykes has studied the way British media described murderer Rose West in relation to her husband, Fred West, and argues that violent women often are given attributes which creates an image of them as abnormal. Wykes does not use the mother, monster and whore narrative – but she illustrates how violent women are sexualized and used as scapegoats in media where masculine values dominate. Her theory will be further explained in chapter 2.6.

To criticize how women are viewed as a homogenous group when it comes to motives for suicide bombings I will refer to Nira Yuval-Davies and her theory of women’s roles in society. Yuval-Davies argues that women are socially constructed as “biological reproducers” and “bearers of honor” within their nation, which affects their political position. These social constructions of women’s roles create an image of an “ideal”, “proper” woman, whom is subject
to different social rules than men. Yuval-Davies argues that, in order to become empowered, women need to be viewed in a more nuanced way – as individuals and parts of much smaller collectivities than just the one of their sex. I will use this theory to highlight the problems occurring when female suicide bombers are generalized as one collective. This will be further explained in chapter 2.4.

I will only use the term “suicide bomber” when referring to the particular women in this thesis. I actively chose not to label them as “terrorists” or “martyrs” in order to focus solely on the way they are portrayed – not on the actual reasons they carry out their suicide bombings or what terms are appropriate in different cultures. When addressing the organizations involved in the suicide bombings I have chosen to refer to them as “extreme organizations”, instead of “terrorist organizations”, “political parties” or “religious groups”. They are not all defined by politics, nor religion, and I do not wish to label them “terrorists” since there is not enough room in this study to include a discussion about these different concepts. However, since the organizations are all mentioned in this thesis because of their involvement in suicide bombings – which generate a great deal of attention and mixed feelings – I feel “extreme organizations” is the most appropriate term to use right now. Other terms used to address female suicide bombers and extreme organizations in this thesis will only be found in quotes from journalists and researchers.

1.4 Method

Suicide bombings carried out by women is a subject that is still in need of further research. I have read literature and scientific articles covering the issue from different perspectives – psychological studies, media studies and research done by international relations theorists. In the end, I have chosen to base this thesis upon what I find to be the two most common theories about female suicide bombers and their motives. The first one is expressed by the group of scholars who claim that female suicide bombers are motivated by personal reasons. These researchers map their past to search for clues that may have led up to the women’s final decisions to blow themselves up. In order to present these arguments, I have chosen to highlight the work done by Mia Bloom and Barbara Victor. Both Bloom and Victor have written specifically about Palestinian suicide bombers, which is most relevant for this study. I have found that other researchers frequently refer to both Bloom and Victor, and I have used a few shorter articles that express opinions
similar to theirs - one of them being written by Katharina Von Knop. To present the opposing arguments – where researchers criticize and challenge the assumption of female suicide bombers being motivated by personal reasons – I will start by referring to Nino Kemoklidze. Kemoklidze has written an article in which she argues that assuming a woman blows herself up because of personal, emotional reasons is undermining women’s capacity of being political actors. To further deepen these arguments, I have chosen to base much of this thesis on Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry’s theory of how violent women are described as motivated by personal reasons, in order to make their actions seem apolitical. Besides using this material to present the two perspectives on female suicide bombers, I will refer to a number of scholars who have also researched the subject. This is done in order to convey a more detailed, nuanced image of Palestinian female suicide bombers and the narratives concerning them. I will also use work by theorists Nira Yuval-Davies and Maggie Wykes, to present a wider perspective of social constructions affecting the way female suicide bombers are described by researchers and in journalistic practice.

To illustrate the narratives concerning female suicide bombers I have chosen to analyze articles from three major newspapers. I wanted the different papers to have some geographical distance from each other, so that they would be based in countries with a slight cultural difference. It was also important to me that they each have many readers – an informative website written in English makes the articles widely available to a large number of people across the globe. Since my thesis serves to show if/to what extent female suicide bombers are portrayed in an unbalanced way, I argue that it is vital to examine media that is particularly influential. Therefore I decided to study ten articles each from The New York Times, The Guardian and the English version of the Israeli newspaper Haaretz.

I chose the New York Times and the Guardian because of their high number of readers as well as their international profile. There are a few other major British newspapers of a similar size, but the Guardian has more coverage of Middle Eastern suicide bombers than, for instance, the Daily Mail and the Daily Telegraph. After some research I also decided on Haaretz since it is a relatively well-known paper and covers world news from a somewhat different perspective. Since my main focus is on Palestinian suicide bombers, Haaretz proved to have a large number of

1 http://www.nytimes.com
2 http://www.guardian.co.uk
3 http://www.haaretz.com
articles covering that specific issue. Initially, I was eager to gain an Arabic perspective on Palestinian suicide bombers, but unfortunately my efforts were complicated by language barriers and the lack of well-developed websites. I tried Al-Jazeera's English homepage\(^4\), as well as the Daily Star Lebanon\(^5\) and the Daily Star Egypt\(^6\), but they all lacked an archive of useful articles. The fact that the newspapers I have studied are all in English makes it difficult to escape the fact that they all have a – more or less – westernized perspective of the issue of suicide bombers. Despite my initial wish to search for journalists voicing an entirely different cultural view of the different cases, I now argue that the papers I have chosen suffice to give a reasonable overview of the type of media that people in the West are confronted with in their everyday lives. If the narratives regarding the violent women are not nuanced enough then these simplified perceptions may become naturalized and grow strong in this influential part of the world.

As previously mentioned I will focus primarily on Palestinian female suicide bombers. The articles I have found in these newspapers are mostly about them, although I have chosen a few additional articles portraying female suicide bombers from other countries. This is because I am mainly interested in the way journalists paint a picture of violent women, and in some cases where this has been explicitly illustrated I have been able to make use of articles even though they describe suicide bombers of other nationalities.

To fully understand how female suicide bombers are portrayed in the media today, I have been inspired by critical discourse analysis as a method used to unravel the social constructions behind the newspaper articles. There are different types of critical discourse analysis and I will be applying a method inspired by Norman Fairclough. His model serves to show discourse as social practice, reproducing hierarchical structures, inequalities and highly affecting the way people view their world. Discourse, Fairclough argues, is not only constituting - but also constituted by people using it to achieve and sustain certain social structures.\(^7\) Fairclough has developed a specific model for his critical discourse analysis which links three aspects of the discourse together. The first is the actual text, the written words that will be the primary object of my analysis. The second is the discursive practice, i.e. the way in which the text is produced and consumed. Here I will attempt to uncover the way in which the information in the article was obtained, and I will

\(^4\) http://www.aljazeera.com
\(^5\) http://www.dailystar.com.lb
\(^6\) http://www.dailystaregypt.com
\(^7\) Winther Jørgensen, Marianne & Phillips, Louise, *Diskursanalys som teori och metod*, Studentlitteratur, Lund, 2000, p.71
also take note of any interesting aspects concerning who has written the article as well as what type of readers it is directed towards. Finally, the third aspect is the social practice – which is the wider context within which text exists. In order to achieve a wider understanding of the newspaper articles, I need to combine the third aspect with the theories reviewed in the chapter above. When these three parts are linked together and seen as a whole, it is possible to perform a critical discourse analysis of the chosen material.

I must emphasize that I will not deeply explore the method of critical discourse analysis. It is a complex framework and I am primarily interested in applying Norman Fairclough’s model to show power structures in the media – how journalists are able to reproduce stereotypes and values that portray violent women in a certain way. To illustrate the social practice I will primarily look for signs of if, and how, narratives of mothers, monsters and whores are reproduced through the language used in the articles. When accounting for the texts, I have chosen to illustrate the discourse by frequently quoting the journalists. This is done in order to give the reader a more clear impression of the words and descriptions being used.

I started by examining ten articles from each of the newspapers. When I began searching the newspaper archives I found that there were quite few articles which contained detailed portrayals of Palestinian female suicide bombers. Ten articles per paper were the most I could find, considering I was looking to do a qualitative analysis, being primarily interested in articles containing extensive narratives. After reading and examining them, I chose to write this thesis based on nine articles per paper. I narrowed them down in order to focus on the texts with the most detailed descriptions of female suicide bombers. Most of the articles are collected from the beginning of the 21st century. This is because Palestinian female suicide bombers have not operated as much since the second intifada, which ended around year 2005. It was also around that time female suicide bombers seemed to provoke the most feelings. I found that the earliest articles offered the most detailed portrayals of the women, with possible explanations to why they committed their crimes. This makes them the most interesting texts to study.

8 ibid p.74
2 Background and deepening of theory

In this chapter the history of Palestinian female suicide bombers will be revised. It will also present different perspectives used by researchers, in order to understand violent women and their motives.

2.1 A History of Female Suicide Bombers

Female suicide bombers are not an unusual phenomenon, despite the strong reactions they provoke when displayed in the media. There have been cases of women blowing themselves – and others – up, in various parts of the world over the last few decades. The most frequent cases have occurred in Sri Lanka, Israel/Palestine and Russia/Chechnya. In Sri Lanka, women have frequently sacrificed themselves in the name of the Tamil Tigers. In Chechnya, the Black Widows – a name given to them by the Russian media – have stirred up a lot of emotions when young women commit suicide bombings in public places. Palestinian women, however, have blown themselves up both with the support of an organization and – in some cases – without being devoted members of extremist groups. It was during the second intifada that the Palestinian women began committing suicide bombings. Between 2000 and 2007 there were 149 “successful” suicide bombings within Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. 10 of these explosions were performed by women, and even more have tried but failed in their mission - and ended up in Israeli prisons instead.

As previously mentioned, it can be difficult to know for sure if, and how, these women were connected to extremist groups. Even so, there are a few organizations that have distinguished themselves by taking responsibility for suicide attacks carried out by women. Nationalist group

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9 Speckhard, Anne (2008): The Emergence of Female Suicide Terrorists, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 31:11
12 A Palestinian uprising (also known as the Al-Aqsa intifada) lasting from year 2000 until year 2005.
13 Sjoberg, Laura & Gentry, Caron E., Mothers, monsters, whores: women’s violence in global politics, Zed Books, London, 2007, p. 112-113
Al-Aqsa Martyr Brigades, Islamic Jihad and the well-known political party Hamas are the most noticeable organizations when it comes to sending women as suicide bombers. As will be explored later on in this thesis, religion is not always the motivating factor behind these groups’ decisions to send suicide bombers – nationalism is also a strong motivating force for many Palestinians as well as the political will to resist the Israeli occupation. Apart from the suicide bombers own intentions, using women in these attacks can give the extremist groups an advantage in different ways. In times when Israeli security is at its most controlling, it can be almost impossible for men who fit the suicide bomber-profile to pass through check-points. Because men of a certain age are regarded by Israeli security services as the common stereotype of those who commit suicide bombings, a female bomber provides a greater element of surprise. She has an increased chance of passing through security checks and might not be physically searched in the same way as a man would be. Women have been known to conceal the bomb, strapped around their waist, by faking a pregnancy. Using women as perpetrators for these types of attacks can be a tactical move for extreme organizations, making their attacks easier to carry out. It is possible, according to researcher Anne Speckhard, that women are also regarded as more dispensable than men, since they are very rarely in leadership positions within extremist groups.

There is an additional reason for organizations to use female suicide bombers – their strong media value. Many people have trouble grasping the fact that a woman, who is initially seen as a life-giver, can also find it within herself to end the lives of civilians. Examples illustrating this will be shown later in this study. When a group then takes responsibility for the bomb, they will usually get more media coverage than they would in a case where the perpetrator was a man.

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18 Speckhard 2008, p. 995

19 ibid, p. 1000

20 ibid, p. 995
The most famous Palestinian female suicide bomber is Wafa Idris. She was the first female suicide bomber during the second intifada. On the 27th of January 2002 she killed herself and an older man in Jaffa Street in Jerusalem. 150 people were also injured in the attack and it received huge media attention. Wafa Idris never made a farewell-video, which left many journalists perplexed and desperately trying to figure out why she went through with the suicide bombing. Was it a mistake? Was it because she’d been recently divorced and was said to be unable to have children? For a long time journalists were searching for rational arguments, mapping her past to find something in her biography that would explain her action. Amongst the Palestinian population, there were many people who praised Wafa Idris’ actions and she is believed to have paved the way for more women to take part in the armed resistance – even if it in many cases turned out to be through suicide bombings. Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades eventually assumed responsibility for Idris’ suicide bombing, which seems to prove that it was not a mistake but in fact something that she had thoroughly planned.

The second intifada continued and more women followed in Wafa Idris’ footsteps. Some of these caused more destruction than others – like Hanadi Jaradat who was sent by Hamas to blow up a restaurant in Haifa, killing 19 civilians. Andalib Takafo killed six civilians and wounded over 100, and Hiba Da’arma killed three and injured approximately 70 in a shopping centre in Jerusalem. Some of the other women killed fewer people but have equally received attention for their actions. They all have their own stories, but the media has often chosen to focus on their family life as motivating factors behind their choices to die, as well as kill others, in this way. Some women were divorced, some were single - and some had young children whilst a few of them are rumored to have been infertile. There are at least a few of the suicide bombers who have made farewell videos. Ayat Akhras expressed critique against the Arab nations for letting young girls fight instead of helping Palestine themselves. Andalib Takafo also made a video where she said that women are as capable as men to partake in the nationalist liberation

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21 ibid, p. 998
22 Brunner 2005, p. 32
23 Speckhard 2008, p. 998
24 Brunner 2005, p. 32
25 There may be different views on who is perceived as a civilian. It is possible that some organizations or individuals may argue that every Israeli that is/has been in the army is a non-civilian, in which case the numbers would be different.
26 Brunner 2005, p. 32-34
struggle. Still, many experts remain unconvinced that female suicide bombings are actually liberating the women of Palestine. According to Maria Holt, female suicide bombings do destabilize the gender hierarchy. But when other women continue to live in a patriarchal society, she argues that it does not make any difference whether or not the suicide bombers are glorified after they are gone.

### 2.2 The Army of Roses

Many researchers have examined the patriarchal structures of society to find the answers to why women use suicide bombings to kill themselves and others. Explaining female suicide bombings by factors such as wanting to avenge dead male relatives, having a miserable love-life or mourning the fact that she cannot have babies – it all commonly reoccurs in the literature surrounding this subject.

In her book, *Army of Roses*, Barbara Victor thoroughly explores the life stories of the female Palestinian suicide bombers. She writes in detail about their education, their religion and their families. All her stories are tragic, and the reader is left with a picture of how the Palestinian women are exploited and used by powerful, male leaders of different extreme organizations. She writes: “…the burden of immorality lies with those cynical leaders who first marginalize their women, setting impossible conditions for them to lead happy lives and then send them off to die by promising them equality and a better life in Paradise.” Whilst also arguing that men are more likely to freely participate in suicide bombings, since they have more freedom to choose in what way they want to be politically active, Victor actively puts women in a victimized position. In the first chapter of her book she explains how Yasser Arafat, on the 27th of January 2002, addressed one of his speeches directly to the women of Palestine. He called them his “army of roses” and in doing so he encouraged them to be his new weapon, ready to “crush Israeli tanks”. At the same time, he asked them to “shabida all the way to Jerusalem”. The term *shabida* is commonly used to address female suicide bombers, as it

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27 ibid, p. 32-33
springs from the word shahid - which is an Arabic word for “martyr”. Later that same day, Wafa Idris became the first female suicide bomber of the second intifada. Arafat’s speech is re-mentioned throughout Victor’s book and implicitly suggests that he, as the primary leader of the Palestinian struggle, was able to greatly influence the women who would later come to blow themselves up.

Mia Bloom argues that the common female stereotype – the one which is gentle, non-violent, a good wife and a caring mother – is the one which is taken advantage of by the extreme organizations. These usual attributes given to women are the ones that can make it easier for her to carry out attacks without arising as much suspicion as a man. Still, Bloom is of the opinion that female suicide bombers truly are being used and manipulated since women – according to her - are more likely to choose peaceful solutions to conflicts. According to Bloom’s book, Dying to Kill, women and men differ in their reasons for committing suicide bombings. She states that men are mostly motivated by deep religious beliefs and a strong sense of nationalism, whilst women’s primary reasons are of a more personal nature. These reasons can include a wish to avenge injured or killed family members and to regain family honor. Bloom writes that many female suicide bombers have been raped or sexually abused and argues that this also can lead to their decisions to blow themselves up. She highlights a connection between the Palestinian female suicide bombers and the Chechen black widows, arguing that the Palestinian women are influenced by the Chechen women who become suicide bombers after the personal tragedies when their husbands die. The aspect of tragedy and trauma is important in Bloom’s theory as it is used to explain the women’s final decision before carrying out the suicide bombings. She argues that the Palestinian women who have blown themselves up all have different backgrounds – but they have all, in some way or another, been outsiders in their own society. The thing that they have in common is a traumatic experience that pushed them over the edge and made them turn to suicide bombing, in order to regain their honor. Bloom still points out that it is partly because of the psychological distress these women are in, that they easily can be taken advantage of by male militants. She writes: “…women are more vulnerable in such patriarchal settings and occasionally

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30 Brunner 2005, p. 29
31 Victor 2005, p. 19-20
32 Bloom 2005, p. 142
33 Ibid, p. 145
34 Ibid, p. 143
35 Ibid, p. 143, 155
36 Ibid, p. 162-163
susceptible to mobilization against their will.” To summarize, Mia Bloom’s theory of why female suicide bombers act the way they do is built upon an element of trauma – there must be personal reasons that explain why these women felt there was no other option than to blow themselves up. In addition to this, she argues than one must be aware of the exploitation and manipulation they may have been subjected to by extreme organizations.

Katharina von Knop also shares this perspective and adds that in Palestine, the only way a woman can become a heroine is by committing a suicide bombing. This actively reinforces the conservative idea of the Palestinian society as one lacking non-violent political possibilities for the female part of the population. Von Knop agrees that personal reasons are the most realistic explanation for women becoming suicide bombers. She writes: “faced with the loss of family members, women are motivated to take up arms”, and also adds that the female bombers often have been victims of sexual violence. How these personal reasons affect women’s decisions is effectively illustrated by Barbara Victor. When she writes about Wafa Idris’ life, her failed marriage is described as “…a key component in her story.” Wafa’s husband is also interviewed, stating that the suicide bombing never would have happened if he hadn’t left her. According to Victor, the divorce made Wafa an outsider and she could never marry again. She is believed to have been sterile and, apparently, not being able to have children was the reason her husband left her. Victor describes Wafa as grief-stricken by her crumbling marriage. When her husband finally divorced her, she had “nothing to live for”. In Army of Roses, Wafa’s job as a volunteer for the Red Crescent seems to be of significance for her later decision to blow herself up. Victor interviews family members and theorists who speculate about to what extent Wafa was psychologically damaged by the amount of violence she witnessed whilst trying to save lives in her work. Besides that, she is described as deeply affected by her friends being injured during the second intifada, as well as her brother being locked up in prison.

37 ibid, p. 164
38 Von Knop 2007, p. 400
39 ibid, p. 400
40 Victor 2004, p. 34
41 ibid, p. 41-43
42 ibid, p. 49
43 ibid, p. 41
44 ibid, p. 50-51
45 ibid, p. 38-40
There are several other female suicide bombers portrayed in Victor’s book. One of them is Darine Abu Aisha, whose path towards suicide bombing seems to have been paved by two significant incidents in her life. 46 The first thing that happened was that she wrote a paper on her concept of feminism, explaining how she, as a Muslim woman, interpreted equality. She received a great deal of attention for this essay and it was printed and distributed at several schools in the Palestinian Territories. The second incident was of a more traumatic nature. Darine was coerced into kissing her male cousin at a check-point, in front of the Israeli soldiers. They told her that they would let a dying child pass through the gates if she did it, and when she finally agreed they laughed and pulled her hijab off her head.47 Victor describes this as being the reason for her final decision to kill herself, and also blames the male cousin for helping her: “…since dozens of other Palestinians from Nablus and the surrounding villages had witnessed the traumatic scene orchestrated by the Israeli soldiers (…) Darine Abu Aisha, with the help of her cousin Rashid, decided to become the second female suicide bomber in the history of the Palestinian struggle.”

Ayat al-Akhras is a third example of a woman claimed to be so deeply affected by personal tragedies that she turned to suicide bombing. Victor describes her as a girl who grew up learning to hate the Israelis. Her two brothers were injured and imprisoned by the soldiers and she witnessed her sister have a miscarriage, caused by the Israelis not letting her get to the hospital. Ayat is portrayed as a woman with a strong interest in the politics surrounding the Arab/Israeli-conflict, never afraid to speak her mind.48 She was deeply in love with a man whom she became engaged to, and they had started to plan their wedding in the refugee camp where they lived.49 In telling Ayat’s life story, Victor emphasizes how much her family’s difficult situation affected her. Her father had a job in a construction business and it required him to co-operate with Israeli workers. Even though he himself claimed to enjoy his work and didn’t judge people because of their nationality, not everyone in the refugee camp agreed with him. Ayat and her family became the subject of their neighbors’ disapproval and had to live in the camp as outsiders.50 In addition to this, Victor describes a situation where Ayat’s neighbor was shot to death by the soldiers, and claims that it was after this she decided to go to the al-Aqsa Martyr Brigades to set up a suicide

46 ibid, p. 105
47 ibid, p. 106-107
48 ibid, p. 201
49 ibid, p. 202
50 ibid, p. 203-205
bomking to save her family and friends from disgrace.\textsuperscript{51} In March 2002, “…only months before her wedding day”,\textsuperscript{52} she secretly left her family home and caught a lift into Jerusalem where she blew herself up in a shopping centre.\textsuperscript{53}

\section*{2.3 Challenging the Stereotype}

Do women have to be the victims of male manipulators or tragic personal relations to become suicide bombers? Nino Kemoklidze is one of the researchers who challenge the image of violent women as victims. She calls the portrayal of hysterical women - turning to suicide bombings as a last, desperate resort - a “myth of victimization”. She argues: “…women (…) are capable of fighting for a purpose other than that of a personal tragedy and/or family bereavement” and further emphasizes the need to search for more complex answers to these matters. Kemoklidze highlights the importance of understanding the context in which these women act, as well as examining what place they have had in their society. The stereotype of the gentle, peaceful woman is – according to Kemoklidze – a socially constructed image. Describing violent women as opposites to this stereotype is just a way of reinforcing the structures of the gender hierarchy – and more than anything, it damages women’s chances of being viewed in the same light as men. She admits there must be incidents where a woman actually does commit a suicide bombing because she has been traumatized – but then that case must be viewed as separate from all other cases of bombings, in order to prevent people from generalizing.\textsuperscript{54} She further argues that both women and men can be victims or perpetrators, but assuming that one gender is always the victim is underestimating women’s capacity to fight for themselves.\textsuperscript{55}

Sjoberg and Gentry share many of Kemoklidze’s arguments. They criticize the narratives which link female violence to personal reasons – such as dead husbands or injured family members – alone. They also argue that repeating these types of theories will lead to women’s actions being viewed only through the lens which is her gender. Thus, the stereotype of the female suicide

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{51} ibid, p. 206, 208-209
  \item \textsuperscript{52} ibid, p. 209
  \item \textsuperscript{53} ibid, p. 224
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Kemoklidze 2009, p. 182
  \item \textsuperscript{55} ibid, p. 183
\end{itemize}
bomber is reinforced. They write: “...women are described as so stricken by grief and fear due to the loss of their men that they have no control over their actions. If women have any decision-making power in their actions it is limited to decisions about their femininity and maternity – taking care of or avenging their men.” Like Kemoklidze, Sjoberg and Gentry agree that personal reasons can be motives for suicide bombings - but this goes for both sexes, and not just women. This also means that they see no reason why women shouldn’t be able to have political, rational interests behind their violent actions. They mention Wafa Idris’ life story and how her divorce is seen a common explanation for her desperate act. In the same chapter Ayat Akras is described, including the popular beliefs of how she was affected by deaths and family issues. However, instead of settling for these answers, Sjoberg and Gentry point out the fact that no political agenda is mentioned in the narratives surrounding these women. Explaining the suicide bombings through lost love and a woman’s grief effectively separates their actions from the ones of men, and misses any alternate underlying motive. These statements implicitly criticize Barbara Victor’s way of portraying the female suicide bombers, but Sjoberg and Gentry also turn towards her directly: “Victor persists in treating women differently. To Victor, Palestinian female suicide bombers are marginalized, divorced, ridiculed and isolated, and influenced by the death and/or humiliation of a male relative.”

Kemoklidze highlights the role which mass media plays in people’s perceptions of female suicide bombings. But rather than focusing on the importance of media coverage, she argues that mass media has a unique capacity for creating myths concerning how and why women blow themselves up. She writes: “in almost every female suicide bombing case, there is an increasing urge to search for some personal story of this or that particular woman which is not always the case when suicide bombings involve men.” Portraying them as torn up, acting out of personal despair, may lead them to be perceived as victims alongside the people they kill. She summarizes by stating that when male violence is seen as the norm and female violence is perceived as something entirely different, in desperate

56 Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, p. 36
57 ibid, p. 32
58 ibid, p. 119
59 ibid, p. 120
60 Her name is spelt differently here than in Victor’s book.
61 Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, p. 121
62 ibid, p.129
63 ibid, p. 137
64 Kemoklidze 2009, p. 185
65 ibid, p. 187
66 ibid, p. 185
need of an explanation – then something needs to change. Assuming that women only want to avenge their husbands or regain their family honour is a method of excluding any possibilities of their actions being political. Sjoberg and Gentry argue that saying female suicide bombers are being used by extreme organizations has the same effect. If they were forced or manipulated into blowing themselves up, then they would not have had a political agenda.

When these women’s tragic life stories are spread in books and newspapers across the world, people may fail to answer the basic question; why, exactly, did they do it? Instead, it can become too easy to attempt to explain all female suicide bombers’ actions by referring to lost babies and dead brothers, without even exploring the possibility that there may have been political – or other – motives leading up to their actions. Sjoberg and Gentry are convinced that female suicide bombings and the motives behind them must not be illustrated through gender-marginalizing narratives – instead they need to be viewed in a more nuanced social context within which these women act.

2.4 Understanding Violent Women

Nira Yuval-Davies addresses the issue of how and why women, in international politics, so often are viewed as one homogenous group – and why they are subject to different social rules and regulations than those applying to men. She argues that women are socially constructed as biological reproducers of “the nation” – i.e. mothers – and that this is done in a way that politically affects them. In the case of female suicide bombers this would be manifested in the perception of women being portrayed in differing ways from male bombers. Yuval-Davies claims that women are usually empowered only when matching the image of a “proper woman”. The proper woman, in this case, is the socially constructed image of what the female part of the population are “supposed” to be like. This image may differ in various parts of the world, but Yuval-Davies further argues that these social constructions are highly affected by gender

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67 ibid, p. 187
68 Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, p. 138-139
69 ibid, p. 137
71 ibid, p. 37
relations and that stereotypes of women are largely created from a widespread perception of women as the human collectivity’s “bearer of honor”. She explicitly mentions that this is a problem in Palestine, where a woman not behaving in an appropriate manner supposedly could be less “worthy” of representing her sex and her people. If this is accurate, it would serve as a possible explanation to why female suicide bombers are sometimes portrayed in ways that set them apart from the image of healthy, peace-loving women. Yuval-Davies emphasizes the importance of viewing women in a more nuanced way. Their sex does not make them a homogenous group – other aspects of their life, such as ethnicity, nationality and class, set them apart and make them both individuals and parts of much smaller, and overlapping, collectives.

When on the subject of narratives describing female suicide bombers, this would mean that the portrayal needs to show a more complex picture - with a focus on the specific individual rather than violent women in general. This way a reader or listener could be presented with a more nuanced understanding.

Sjoberg and Gentry’s theory of how violent women are portrayed in the media is based upon their similar presumption that the narratives concerning female violence are constructed in a different way than those describing male violence. These narratives are, according to the authors, stories describing complicated situations in a simplified way. This leaves the reader with a sense of understanding which is usually just created by the narrative fitting people and events into categories, generalizing in order to make it easier for people to grasp the information. In the case of female suicide bombers this would, for example, mean that if enough journalists and authors claim to know the reasons to why Palestinian women blow themselves up and produce enough texts expressing those “facts” - an image will be created that continues to sort all female suicide bombers into that category. Sjoberg and Gentry argue that the common explanation as to why women commit violent actions is presumed to lie within her sex. To illustrate how this is done they have developed three examples, offering different explanations of female violence. These three types of description are the mother, the monster and the whore narrative, and they suffice to show how violent women – such as suicide bombers and murderers – are commonly portrayed in the media. A narrative describing a violent woman can include elements of two or

72 ibid, p. 39
73 ibid, p. 45
74 ibid, p. 38
75 Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, p. 27
76 ibid, p. 29
three of these types. Below is a short overview of the different types of narratives, as they are present in the debate about female suicide bombers.

### 2.5 Mothers, Monsters, Whores

In portrayals of female suicide bombers, their motherhood is constantly present. Sjoberg and Gentry argue that it is as if being a mother is always a woman’s foremost purpose, and if she is incapable of being a good mother then that seems to serve as a sufficient explanation to why she has turned violent. “...women’s violence is often attributed to vengeance driven by maternal and domestic disappointments.” This also includes suggesting that lost love is the reason women blow themselves up – the destroyed vision of a happy family life is presumed to affect women deeply. This is frequently present in narratives about Palestinian female suicide bombers. Motherhood is supposedly a woman’s primary driving force – and this either makes her a good mother, as nature intended, or it turns her into quite the opposite. Sjoberg and Gentry claim that there are two types of violent mothers – the nurturing mother and the vengeful mother. The nurturing mother acts out of support, and is exemplified in situations where women help extremist groups or encourage men in committing violent crimes. This type of mother can be perceived as less of a threat – she may play a part in certain crimes, but she is still acting within her designated role of nurturing femininity. The second type is the vengeful mother – who solely acts out of revenge. This is prominent in the narratives describing how Palestinian women blow themselves up when their family members have been injured or killed by the Israeli soldiers.

The monster narrative creates an image of women as ruthless monsters. When no other explanation is sufficient enough, the monster narrative is used to label violent women as evil by nature or mentally ill. It thus separates them from healthy, “ideal” women who are “supposed” to be non-violent and peaceful. “...violent women in the monster narrative are not responsible for their actions because there is something wrong with their womanhood.” Because of this, female violence can also be

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77 ibid, p. 30  
78 ibid, p. 33  
79 ibid, p. 31-32  
80 For examples, see previously mentioned work by Mia Bloom, Katharina von Knop and Barbara Victor.  
81 Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, p. 36  
82 ibid, p. 33
characterized as more dangerous than male violence, because the violent woman is abnormal and has lost control of her “natural” instincts. Violence. Women, described according to the monster narrative, are pictured as less predictable and less rational than violent men, because they are presumed to be psychologically disturbed. Comparing them to monsters also robs them of their humanity and eliminates all possibilities that their actions sprung out of rational thought.

The whore narrative equates female violence with her sexuality. “When men do bad things, it is because there is something evil about them; when women do bad things, their evil is sexualized.” Using the whore narrative to explain women’s violent actions can reduce them to only their sexuality. Portrayals of female suicide bombers and murderers often characterize the women by their sexuality – either they have a never-ending sexual appetite or they are victims of sexual dysfunctions. This can include accusations of being lesbian, not being able to have children or simply failing to satisfy the men in their lives. As with the mother and monster narratives, the flaws attributed to a woman by the whore narrative serves to make her less of a woman. By doing so the image of her becomes abnormal and clearly sets her apart from the rest of the female population.

Sjoberg and Gentry argue that regardless of which of these narratives is used to describe violent women, it will unavoidably portray them as incapable of making their own, rational decisions. Whether they are described as murdering mothers, insane maniacs or over-sexual prostitutes – the attributes given them seemingly eliminates all possibilities of their decisions being serious political statements. This excludes their voices from global politics. Using these types of narratives signals that women’s violence is trivial, scary and unpredictable – and, more than anything, politically unimportant.

83 ibid, p. 37
84 ibid, p. 38
85 ibid, p. 42
86 ibid, p. 41-42
87 ibid, p. 46-48
88 ibid, p. 49
89 ibid, p. 50-51
90 ibid, p. 57
2.6 Sexual killers and “anti-women”

Maggie Wykes has researched the way violent women, in particular murderers, have been described in the media. She argues that in articles where the women are portrayed, journalists constitute a discourse where they fail to view the women’s reasons for committing their crimes in a nuanced way. Instead they focus on exploring the sexuality and psychological health of the women in particular – without deconstructing their history and present in order to come up with more complex alternatives.91

Wykes reaches this conclusion after studying female murderers’ representation in the British press – in particular the case of 25 Cromwell Street in Gloucester, where couple Fred and Rose West raped and killed young girls until they were caught by the police in the mid-nineties.92 After comparing the narratives concerning Fred with the ones about Rose, Wykes argues that Rose is primarily described as a sexual killer, whilst Fred is treated relatively respectfully by the press. Wykes lists the attributes given Rose by journalists as following:

“depraved; lesbian; aggressive; violent; menacing; bisexual; likes black men; likes oral sex; kinky; seductive; a prostitute; oversexed; a child abuser; nymphomaniac; sordid; monster; she had a four poster bed with the word c**t [sic] carved on the head board; posed topless; exhibitionist; never wore any knickers; liked sex toys; incestuous; who shed tears in silence “no sohs, no sound at all”.93

Wykes does not explicitly use the concept of mother, monster and whore narratives, but explains that describing Rose in the way above effectively creates an image of her as an “anti-woman”. Whilst portraying a murderer as overly sexual and insane, an image of a “normal” woman is constituted at the same time by comparison. A type of gender-conservatism is being used – the tabloids are indirectly saying that if Rose West had been “normal”, heterosexual and a good wife, then this would never have happened.94 Combining Wykes theory with Sjoberg and Gentry’s shows that there are patterns in the way violent women are portrayed in different types of media. Even though Wykes’ focus is on murderers and Sjoberg and Gentry write more about suicide

92 ibid, p. 233
93 ibid, p. 239
94 ibid, p. 240
bombers, recognizing that violent women are being described in similar ways regardless of which crime they committed indicates a need of uncovering power structures within the media.
3 Female Suicide Bombers in the Media

This chapter presents a basic analysis of articles from three different newspapers.

3.1 The New York Times

James Bennet, journalist at the New York Times, has written several articles covering the issue of female suicide bombers. In January 2002, shortly after Wafa Idris blew herself up, he wrote an article describing the incident and gave some short information about the woman who caused the stir. What is most prominent about his writing in this article is the number of quotes he uses. There are elements of descriptions that comply with the mother, monster, whore theory, but Bennet does not express this himself – instead the interesting portrayals are created by voices of the people he quotes. “She bore in her belly a fetus of a rare heroism, and gave birth by blowing herself up” (written by an Egyptian journalist), “Wafa did not carry in her suitcase makeup but, rather, enough explosives to fill the enemies with horror” (the quote of a Jordanian journalist) and “any woman who lost a brother or father to Israeli attacks and found her life had become valueless would do the same” (the words of an unknown writer) are examples of such descriptions that fit the mother narrative or – like the comparison between makeup and bombs – twists femininity into something more suitable for a murderer. Even though these are not Bennet’s words, the values in the quotes become reproduced by him using them again. He does not challenge these expressions, but simply lets the quotes stand by themselves - without presenting possibilities not linked to Wafa Idris’ sex. In his own words, he mentions Idris’ divorce and that she was a volunteer at the Red Crescent. Later on in January 2002 the New York Times had also published an article by Bennet, where he paints a picture of Wafa Idris with his own words. He starts the text by describing Idris as a woman “…divorced by a husband disappointed over their failure to have children, enraged as she picked up and patched the Palestinian wounded of the current conflict.” Here he addresses both the fact that she was divorced and her job as a volunteer at the Red Crescent. In regards to her job he writes; “Ms. Idris, a volunteer medic who raised doves and adored children, was out to kill as many Israeli civilians as she could”. This clearly shows how Sjoberg and Gentry’s mother-narrative can be illustrated in journalistic practice. Further, Bennet attempts to account for how women have helped suicide bombers in

95 Arab Press Glorifies Bomber as Heroine, January 11th 2002
the past, and writes; “in one case a Palestinian woman flirted with a young Israeli to lure him into a lethal trap”.96 He does not further explain what happened, or in what way the woman flirted, but the short description seems to exemplify elements of the whore-narrative in articles concerning violent women. Bennet again mentions the e-mail flirting woman in an article written in February 2002. Neither here does he go into detail about what, exactly, the flirting involved.97 Before leaving the subject of Wafa Idris, it is interesting to note how Bennet in two articles accounts for the confusion related to whether or not Wafa Idris was blowing herself up on purpose. In January 2002 he starts a sentence off with; “if the bomber intended to die…”,98 and in February the same year he stated that Idris’ family as well as Israeli police were unsure whether or not she intended to die in the attack, rather than “plant the bomb and escape”.99 These kinds of speculations could add to a presumption of women not being determined in their violent actions.

An article written in June 2002, concerning 20-year old Arien Ahmed who attempted to carry out a suicide bombing but was caught and sent to prison, is also written by Bennet. This text is created out of his words, rather than quotes, and descriptions of Arien Ahmed include: “reasons as personal as lost love and as political as the hate-soaked conflict led her to act” and “Ms. Ahmed was out to avenge the death of her fiancé”. Here, Bennet mentions the possibilities of her actions being influenced by politics, but highlighting her dead fiancé and her family history still puts emphasis on the personal reasons. He writes that her father died while she was a young girl and that her mother remarried and abandoned her. In this article Bennet also attempts to discuss female suicide bombers as a group and states; “all the suicides and would-be suicides [in Israel/Palestine] have been Muslim, and most have been unmarried”. Shortly after that he accounts for seven women becoming suicide bombers, “including the mother of a 3-year old”.100 That marriage and children’s age are mentioned in this context must mean that the writer somehow finds it necessary to report. Does Bennet think that being a suicide bomber and mother of a 3-year old is worse than just being a suicide bomber? Why does he just state the child’s age without arguing deeper about why it is of importance? When claiming most bombers have been unmarried, Bennet does not refer to any statistics, nor does he deepen his argument of how being unmarried explains committing suicide and killing civilians. It seems that the purpose of reporting these types of details is to make the

96 Arab Woman’s Path to Unlikely ‘Martyrdom’, January 11th 2002
97 Israelis Declare Arab Woman Was in Fact a Suicide Bomber, February 9th 2002
98 Female Bomber Strikes Scarred Shopping District in Jerusalem, January 27th 2002
99 Arab Press Glorifies Bomber as Heroine, January 11th 2002
100 MIDEAST TURMOIL: THE BOMBERS; Rash of New Suicide Bombers Exhibit No Patterns or Ties, June 21st 2002
story more horrifying - and thus, makes it another example of how the mother-narrative can be constructed in news media.

Alissa J. Rubin has written an article for the New York Times in 2009, where she attempts to uncover the story behind would-be suicide bombers Baida and Ranya. They are both locked up in an Iraqi prison in Diyala Province for trying to commit suicide bombings in Iraq, and Rubin meets with them several times in order to learn more about them. In her article, Rubin calls female suicide bombing a phenomenon, and argues that there are many different reasons why these women go through with their actions:

“Each woman’s story is unique, but their journeys to jihad do have commonalities. Many have lost close male relatives. Baida and Ranya lost both fathers and brothers. Many of the women live in isolated communities dominated by extremists, where radical understandings of Islam are the norm. In such places, women are often powerless to control much about their lives; they cannot choose whom they marry, how many children to have or whether they can go to school beyond the primary years. Becoming a suicide bomber is a choice of sorts that gives some women a sense of being special, with a distinguished destiny.”

As is illustrated by Rubin’s reasoning above, she also uses the mother-narrative to explain the women’s actions by the loss of family members. She also effectively puts them in a victimized position, which could lead readers to assume that female suicide bombers, in this case, have no other choice. It is, according to Rubin’s description, a choice that makes their lives worthwhile - not a choice intended to create political consequences. Rubin also writes that women about to blow themselves up “apply heavy makeup, because they believe they are going to heaven and want to look their best”. She does not deepen that statement further, nor explain why she considers it relevant for the story. Describing how a suicide bomber applies makeup could be interpreted as a way of twisting traditional female attributes into something used by a killer. Rubin describes Baida as a woman filled with pride over her attempt at blowing herself up. She writes that Baida was married, but soon became a victim of a violent marriage - where her husband frequently beat her. Instead, her father became a safe figure in her life, but when he died she “felt much more helpless”. Baida’s brothers, who were fighters of an Islamic group, were also killed and Rubin writes; “her goal was to take revenge on her brothers’ killers – American soldiers”. This suggests that Baida decided upon the suicide bombing because of these personal reasons.

101 How Baida Wanted to Die, August 16th 2009
Rubin creates a picture of Baida as a woman who seems excited at the idea of killing civilians. The writer uses her own, subjective impressions to describe how Baida reacted when she was asked to speak of suicide bombings; “she [Baida] spoke with enthusiasm, her face animated, vividly alive.” When she learns that Baida has smuggled a mobile phone into the prison, Rubin writes “I felt a wave of unease. She was not a beginner.” Later, Baida ends up in a psychiatric ward at an Iraqi hospital. Rubin goes to visit her, in the ward for the “criminally insane”. By describing the environment of Baida’s hospital department, the writer creates a strong image that is compatible with the monster-narrative.

“Some patients wandered about, talking to themselves. Some wore soiled clothes and looked as if they had not washed in months. As we approached Baida’s ward, a woman, stark naked, came running out screaming; she was pursued by members of the hospital staff as well as by other patients and eventually was covered in a large blanket and brought back inside.”

When they meet again, inside the hospital, Rubin asked her more about killing. When Baida said that she would celebrate Americans being killed, Rubin adds “she smiled beatifically.” Later, she writes; “Baida was smiling again. ‘If I had not seen you before and talked to you, I would kill you with my own hands,’ she said pleasantly.” Rubin describes her own reaction as feeling “nauseated”. The image of the woman murdering civilians with a smile on her face, in a ward for the criminally insane, effectively constitutes a monster narrative. Baida is described as psychologically damaged – wanting to avenge her dead family, which complies with the mother narrative, but also enjoying the killing. Baida may really be mentally ill, in which case she might have actually smiled whilst talking about murdering, but when Rubin starts her article by discussing female suicide bombers as a phenomenon and their reasons in general, the disturbing portrayal of Baida could send a message to readers that all female suicide bombers are like her. Using adjectives like “smiling” and “pleasantly” to describe the way Baida talks about killing seems subjective and portrays her as a scary, unreliable woman.

Rubin also writes about Ranya, the 15-year old prisoner. She describes her family background as tragic – with her brother being abducted, her father kidnapped and murdered and her mother deciding it was time for Ranya to marry. Rubin’s recollections of the meeting with Ranya signals that the girl was unaware of what she was about to do. Apparently her husband introduced her to

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102 How Baida Wanted to Die, August 16th 2009
people who strapped the bomb around her waist but Ranya, in Rubin’s interview, claimed that she didn’t understand what she was about to do. Even so, Rubin writes; “Baida later told me that, from her own conversations in jail with Ranya, it was clear that she knew exactly what she was doing and was proud of it.” This way, Ranya is inevitably an exploited victim or a liar.

Anwar Ali is also a New York Times-journalist who meets up with Ranya, in November 2009 in Iraq. Ali questions Ranya about her version of what happened when she was sent on a bombing mission. In this article, the writer highlights Ranya’s lying and describes her as a stubborn child. When Ali first meets with her and the other suicide bombers she writes; “I thought I would find poor, uneducated, submissive women. Instead I found confident, rude women who talked angrily, if also naively and deceptively.” When Ranya later, in the interview, admits having lied to the police, Ali concludes; “my only other experience in investigative work has been with my 4-year old daughter when she does something wrong and tries to hide it from me. Maybe being a mother makes one a good detective.” When the writer explicitly compares Ranya with a naughty 4-year old, she is making a statement that Ranya’s actions were merely those of a child. She further describes Ranya as well-dressed and wearing a “neat, pretty hijab”. That image is quickly followed by adjectives as “confident” and “intent”, and Ali writes that Ranya speaks with an “angry tone” and undoubtedly has come to the interview against her will. This also shows an example of how a woman is described as having feminine appearance, whilst her inside is far from what a gentle, peace-loving woman “should” be like. The image of Ranya is constructed as one of a childish, stubborn girl – which effectively eliminates all possibilities of her having a political agenda.

The New York Times apparently has a few writers who have attempted to understand female suicide bombers, from somewhat different perspectives. Still there are journalists, such as John F. Burns, who claim that suicide bombings are “an outrage that deserves no understanding.” As a contrast, there is one article published by the New York Times which offers a slightly different perspective on female suicide bombers. In August 2009 Lindsey O’Rourke expressed her opinion on suicide bombers, challenging the journalists and researchers who claim women are motivated by personal reasons and/or mental illness alone. She argues that there is no certain profile for women who blow themselves up, and we must stop these simple assumptions. She writes; “yes, many female suicide terrorists are motivated by revenge for close family members or friends killed by occupation
forces. But so too are males.” O’Rourke states that conclusions drawn just depending on the sex of the bomber, makes it impossible to grasp the full, more complex picture.\textsuperscript{106}

3.2 The Guardian

The Guardian’s articles about female suicide bombers are generally shorter than the ones in the New York Times, and contain less detailed portrayals. In an article from 2009 three male journalists give a brief overview of Sri Lanka, Russia and Palestine and the female suicide bombers that operate within those countries. In the short passage about Palestine, Wafa Idris is mentioned and the description of her is as follows; “Wafa Idris was a divorced paramedic who had been wounded at work by rubber-coated bullets fired by Israeli troops.” Since no other information is revealed about Idris it seems that the writers decided her marriage status, her care-giving job and her injuries were the most interesting facts about her.\textsuperscript{107} Similar priorities can be seen in earlier articles – for example, in January 2002 Peter Beaumont calls Idris a “model young woman” who was always kind and loving towards her friends and family, as well as voluntarily helping injured people in her job with the Red Crescent. He also mentions that she was hit by rubber-coated bullets during her work. After portraying Idris as a caring young woman, Beaumont contrasts this with the image of her as a suicide bomber, “on Sunday, Wafa Idrees decided on a different, very lethal kind of activism”. He writes that she “rushed” from her home – which gives the impression that it was an impulsive decision and not something that she had planned. There is no mention of the possibility that her decision could be based on anything other than her being hit by bullets. At the end of the article, Beaumont states that many more Palestinian women could easily become suicide bombers if they have been “radicalized (…) by their experiences, but no longer prepared to stand aside and take on traditional roles.” This suggests that female suicide bombers are those who have had traumatic experiences and are frustrated with the patriarchal society – which also puts them in a victim’s position. Beaumont also describes Idris as a tomboy, whose “instinct was to be on the frontline, throwing stones with the boys”. He writes that her husband divorced her when he “discovered she could not have children”.\textsuperscript{108} These sentences increasingly set Idris apart from the “ideal” woman – if she is more like a boy in her actions, and cannot have children then there is something

\textsuperscript{106} Behind the Woman Behind the Bomb, August 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2008
\textsuperscript{107} Female suicide bombers: Tamil Tiger teenage girl led the way, June 11\textsuperscript{th} 2009
\textsuperscript{108} From an angel of mercy to an angel of death, January 31\textsuperscript{st} 2002
“wrong” with her femininity. The infertile factor complies with the whore narrative, since it is an example of a sexual dysfunction that failed to satisfy her husband.

In an article from 2009, Nesrine Malik attempts to understand why some women choose to blow themselves up. She highlights the problem which occurs when people are dependent on a woman, and she dies. She writes: “It is more difficult to understand why women, some of whom are mothers, choose to take this route. While they may not be the breadwinners in the average family, they nonetheless, mothers or not, usually have some caretaking role, rendering their suicides all the more traumatic to their dependents.” This is an interesting perspective. Malik focuses on the suicide bomber’s friends and family and makes the suicide bombing sound like a selfish act – not because she kills civilians, but because she may have people counting on her care-giving. Malik claims that “terrorists have a fertile breeding ground” where women have experienced loss, which clearly suggests they blow themselves up because of personal reasons. She also portrays women as victims of their society, saying they are dying because their future is nonexistent and because frustration and anger has built up inside them. Because of this, Malik argues, the women are “victims twice over.” In an article from December 2002, Peter Beaumont guesses that “the bombers are those who feel too much – or cannot feel at all.” Again, he lists Idris’ bullet injuries and her broken marriage as possible factors of why she killed herself, but still he seems unable to fully grasp her case. He writes: “I still cannot get a handle on Wafa Idrees” and again claims that she was a loving daughter and a kind friend. Portraying Wafa Idris’ in this way – as someone who possibly feels nothing or is so caring that it somehow twisted into a suicide bombing - complies with the monster or the mother theory. If Beaumont argues that she wasn’t affected by the thought of suicide bombing, and thus decided to blow herself up with a number of civilians - then that would be consistent element of the monster-narrative. If he argues that she was caring, and had too many feelings bottled up inside her – then that could match Sjoberg and Gentry’s idea of the nurturing mother. The nurturing mother is, as previously mentioned, a woman who commits crimes with caring as her primary motive. She can support male suicide bombers, or blow herself up in order to protect her family – so even though she is twisted, she still acts within her designated role of femininity. Similar descriptions occur in Libby Brooks’ article from January 2002. She accounts for a female suicide bombing and reproduces quotes from people living in the West Bank, saying; “women have reached a stage where they simply want to feel safe.” Brooks writes that the Palestinian women long for a “normal” life,

109 Mothers of martyrdom, June 14th 2009
110 Suicide notes, December 22nd 2002
111 Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, p. 33
where their families are safe. She does not explicitly write that women blow themselves up because they want this, but she does not offer any other explanation to why female extremism has become more common. Brooks recites examples of the problems faced by Palestinian women living under occupation today – such as child birth, check-points and political resistance. She does not go into detail about how these problems – such as the alleged difficulties in resisting the occupation – present themselves. Instead Brooks quotes a Palestinian who argues that women are affected differently by the occupation than men are – “women are not just individuals but mothers, sisters, wives.” This quote is not challenged by Brooks, she lets it stand by itself and it illustrates Yuval-Davies point about how women often are viewed as a collective rather than individuals. An interesting aspect of the text is that the article never mentions men also being fathers, brothers and husbands. Brooks uses a finishing quote, by another Palestinian, which adds to the impression she creates of Palestinian women committing suicide bombings out of pure frustration; “many women are depressed and suicidal. If there is a chance for Palestinian women to martyr themselves, then they will.” She fails to address any statistics and does not explain why – if so many women wish to blow themselves up – not even 10 per cent of the Palestinian suicide bombings have been carried out by women.

There are a few other journalists at the Guardian who write explicitly about the female suicide bombers’ motives. Polly Curtis, in an article from February 2004, cites researcher Cerwyn Moore whose theory is that Chechen women blow themselves up because so many men are locked up in prison. The Palestinian women, he states, commit suicide bombings because it often is easy for them to get through Israeli check-points. Curtis writes that, in order to really get to the bottom of the underlying motives behind the bombings, one must accept that the truth is a lot more complex and is built up by several contributing factors. However, she does not offer any further explanation as to what those factors might be. In March 2002 Graham Usher accounts for 18-year old Ayat al-Akhras’ suicide bombing in Jerusalem. He writes about her engagement to a Palestinian man and effectively constructs an image of her, according to the mother-narrative, by adding; “instead of marriage she chose to follow in the footsteps of Wafa Idriss.” This sets her apart from the “ideal” woman since Usher describes her as choosing the bomb instead of a family. Usher moves on to a discussion about al-Akhras motives and after emphasizing the shock her family experienced when she died he writes; “a glance at her history revealed motives for vengeance.” He lists the

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112 Mothers of martyrdom, June 14th 2009
113 Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, p. 112-113
114 The human face of terror, February 24th 2004
tragedies in her life, which include a cousin being killed and two cousins being badly injured. This clearly gives the reader an impression of al-Akhras deciding upon her suicide bombing after being traumatized when her relatives were hurt. Usher ends the article by quoting an interviewed Palestinian, saying: “a suicide bomber is a mixture of despair and resistance.”115 If Usher is referring to both male and female suicide bombers or just the female ones is unclear.

Journalist Manuela Dviri has written an article of a different kind. In February 2005 she interviewed would-be suicide bombers – e.g. Palestinian women who somehow intended to blow themselves up, but ended up arrested and imprisoned. As the answer to why these women made their choices, Dviri quotes a prison guard:

“There are 30 of them, between 17 and 30 years old: some of them are married and others aren’t: some have children and some haven’t. Some of them did it to make amends for a father, brother, husband or lover who was a collaborator, others to escape becoming victims of honour killings, and for others who were psychologically frail, it was a good way to commit suicide and at the same time become heroines of their country.”116

These are not Dviri’s own words, but she does not challenge the source or the answer, nor does she offer any alternative. Using the quote above to explain why the female prisoners tried to blow themselves up reproduces the image of the frustrated, traumatized suicide bomber. Suggesting that they are psychologically damaged, in search for a way to kill themselves, complies with the monster-narrative. Being victims of honor killings could – if it was explored in more depth – be connected to the whore-narrative and associating the suicide bombing with the perpetrators family – children and husbands – is consistent with parts of the mother-narrative. The major part of the article consists of Dviri interviewing five Palestinian female prisoners. They mostly talk about Islam, but at the end Dviri mainly talks to one of the women. She is imprisoned for helping a man commit a suicide attack in which four people were killed and around 80 injured. Dviri explains that amongst the dead were a young couple who were expecting a baby. They were on their way from a scan when they were killed by the attack. The writer also states that they had left their two other children – three and seven years old – with a babysitter. This description is quite detailed and it gives an impression of the attack being worse because one of the victims was pregnant. When Manuela Dviri interviews the Palestinian woman, whose name is Kahira Saadi,

115 At 18, bomber became martyr and murderer, March 30th 2002
116 Women on the edge of destruction, February 7th 2005
they discuss why she helped out with the bombing attack – and what day it was carried out on. Here follows the final part of the article, where Kahira Saadi (K) is asked by Dviri (MD) what day the attack was on:

“K: I don’t remember the exact date, only that it was Mother’s Day, and that is why I prepared him some flowers.

MD: Then it was February. It was lamed b’shavat according to the Jewish calendar.

K: How can you remember it so well?

MD: Because my son was killed on lamed b’shavat, on Mother’s Day.

I see her grow pale, almost stagger. “No, it wasn’t you, it was in 1998” I tell her. “And my son was in the army, he was in Lebanon; your attack was in 2002. But we certainly have an anniversary in common.”

Kahira doesn’t say another word.”

It is interesting to ponder what effect a journalist has on her work when she is interviewing someone she is obviously affected by. Dviri writes about a pregnant victim and, in the larger part of her interview, seems slightly accusing towards the Palestinian women and tells them about how she lost her own son. Writing a portrayal of someone, when the person is seen through the eyes of someone who does not seem to be objective, must also affect the image created in the text. When Dviri focuses on the fact that Saadi – and the other women – kill people’s children, perhaps she unconsciously constructs an image of them as monsters as well as females with a twisted senses of maternity.

Lastly, an article written in December 2006 by Rory McCarthy portrays Palestinian women from Hamas. McCarthy partly focuses on these women’s families – what they are like, the number of children and so on – but he also highlights the amount of power the women hold in their community. Fatma al-Najar is the first woman who is explicitly mentioned in the article. At the time she was the oldest Palestinian woman to blow herself up. She was a great-grandmother and McCarthy points out that she had nine children and even more grandchildren – the family consisted of around 80 persons. The writer lists a series of tragic events that affected the al-Najar family, such as imprisonments, killings and a demolished home, but he never directly claims this

117 Women at the edge of destruction, February 7th 2005
118 Women at the edge of destruction, February 7th 2005
is why Fatma decided to go through with the bombing. Further on, McCarthy mentions a series of influential women associated with Hamas—which was the group Fatma al-Najar was also connected to. He writes; “in this conservative and patriarchal society the militancy has previously been almost entirely dominated by men. Now that is changing.” He quotes a number of Palestinian women who talk about the greater part they now play in the conflict and how they no longer need to glorify only men. There is also room for women with differing opinions to make their voices heard—McCarthy quotes one of them, who argues: “it is also jihad to care about your children and bring them up well. (…) We don’t all need to be martyrs.” All in all, this article springs from a different perspective than many of the texts previously reviewed in this study. Writing about suicide bombing and women’s empowerment in the same text has not been frequently occurring in the newspapers studied so far. Still, McCarthy ends the article by mentioning Wafa Idris and only describes her as “a divorced paramedic”, which is consistent with many of the other journalists’ portrayals.119

3.3 Haaretz

The articles chosen from Haaretz differ in certain ways from the ones previously reviewed. It is important to note that, since Haaretz is a newspaper based in Israel, it may have slightly different political motives than the two other papers. Here, it is not just the portrayal of violent women that is prominent; it is the portrayal of violent Palestinian women. In several articles the Palestinian community is criticized, mostly for being conservative and breeding suicide bombers—but there are still interesting views of the female bombers and I primarily attempt to highlight those. The writers at Haaretz frequently use the word “terrorist” instead of suicide bomber, and in one article Palestinian universities are described as a “hothouse for suicide bomber”.120

In an article from May 2003, Arnon Regular describes several different Palestinian women. He claims they are radical—not only because they blow themselves up and kill people with them, but because they go against the social norms of the Palestinian community. Regular writes; “Even among secular Palestinians, a woman is traditionally subject to the men in her life—first her father, and later her husband. Her simplest action—even going out shopping—requires written or oral permission from the relevant man.” One can of course discuss whether or not this is true, but Regular’s point here seems to be

119 Sisters, mothers, martyrs, December 5th 2004
120 Female suicide bomber kills one, wounds over 100 in J’lem, January 27th 2002
to portray the female suicide bombers as unruly. Further, he moves on to the subject of Wafa Idris and describes her accordingly:

“Idris, 27, was not chosen by chance. A divorcee who produced no children in nine years of marriage, suffering from bad relations with her elder brother (the dominant male in her life, since her father was dead), she was ready for any kind of escape. In traditional Palestinian society, a divorced, barren woman is a burden on the family and has no chance of ever remarrying.”

Here, Regular explains Idris’ decision to blow herself up as an act of desperation after her divorce. The same seems to apply to Darine Abu Aisha, who became a suicide bomber shortly after Idris. Regular describes her as “another divorcee” and adds the fact that her ex-husband and brother had been killed. The writer creates the impression that the motives behind both Idris’ and Abu Aisha’s acts where similar, based on divorce and bad or nonexistent relations with male relatives. Regular continues by claiming that after a while, “an abnormal family situation soon stopped being a requirement for female suicide bombers.” He then writes about the suicide bombers Iyat al-Ahris, Andalib Takatka and Hiba Da’arma – all of whom he claims were unmarried. This must mean that what Regular means by an “abnormal family situation” is simply divorce – but he offers no explanation to why the three “normal” women blew themselves up. In February 2002, shortly after Idris’ attack, Ori Nir wrote an article about the attack. He describes how she married her cousin and states that “she was divorced nine years later because she had not been able to bear a child.” He concludes that “emotional distress” and her divorced “may have compelled her to carry out the suicide attack.” In September 2004, Haaretz published an article written by Itim. It also addresses the possible importance of divorce related to suicide bombings. The reasoning is similar to that of the previous text, and the article states that for divorced women the suicide bombing serves as “a means of cleansing their image.” Further, Itim writes that Wafa Idris “was chosen because she was divorced and childless.” The article does not offer any other explanation to why Idris and the other women made their specific choices – being divorced and/or childless seems to be enough.

Amira Hass writes, in an article from January 2002, that Idris’ family refused to believe she blew herself up because of her presumed infertility. Instead, Hass emphasizes the voluntary work Idris did for the Red Crescent. She uses quotes from Idris’ family, explaining the amount of blood and

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121 Female bombers show shift in thinking, May 21st 2003
122 Female bombers show shift in thinking, May 21st 2003
123 The Palestinians see a “Joan of Arc”, February 10th 2002
124 Itim is an Israeli news agency.
125 Terrorist was seventh female bomber, September 23rd 2004
dead people as something that undoubtedly affected Wafa. Many of these narratives circulate around marriage and motherhood as the motivating factors behind the bombings. What these journalists all have in common is the way they twist these factors into divorce and a dysfunctional motherhood – one that doesn’t even exist. Suggesting women blow themselves up when they cannot have a happy family is consistent with Sjoberg and Gentry’s mother- and whore-narratives. As for the article by Amira Hess, she creates an image of Wafa Idris as a woman damaged by the injuries and killings she saw whilst working. This still portrays her as a suicide bomber acting out of desperation, finding an escape but not having a political agenda.

In May 2004, Uri Ash wrote a long article for Haaretz, describing Hiba Da’arma’s suicide bombing which destroyed a restaurant in Haifa. The story is told through the eyes of Hayk Panoyan, who served as a waiter at the restaurant that day. He lived, and was interviewed by Ash. The most interesting part of this article is where Panoyan describes Da’arma. Even though it is the words of an individual, reproducing the quotes in Haarets without Ash challenging them makes them highly available to the readers. Panoyan gives his impression of Da’arma; “she simply came to kill and didn’t care about anything. She heard Arabic being spoken in the restaurant and saw that there were children” and then he asks: “why do they need to send a girl to blow herself up next to children?” Panoyan seems disturbed by the fact that a woman – who could also be a mother – could find it in herself to detonate a bomb where children were present. It sounds as if she only came into the restaurant because there were children there, and nowhere in the article does Panoyan or Ash ask themselves whether she had any ideological or political motives.

In an article from September 2004, Amos Harel and Arnon Regular construct a more aggressive picture of a suicide bomber. This one is Zaynab Abu Salem, who blew herself up in Jerusalem. She is described as offering to commit the suicide bombing, wanting to “avenge Palestinians killed recently by Israeli troops in Nablus.” She is claimed to have threatened the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade, saying if she was not permitted to perform the attack she would instead attack using a knife. The journalists end the article by describing Abu Salem’s father and his illness – apparently he suffered from a heart condition and had to be rushed to the hospital when the news of his daughter’s death reached him. If Harel and Regular add this to make the suicide bomber seem more heartless or if they consider it a relevant fact, is up to the readers to interpret. A similar

126 “What good are rocks against tanks?”, January 31st 2002
127 There’s a reason I’m alive – I just don’t know what it is, May 25th 2004
128 Bomber, 18, volunteered for suicide attack, September 23rd 2004
concern arises in another article by Harel, from 2004, where he describes how a Palestinian woman blew herself up, killing four Israelis. The only facts Harel communicates to his readers, about the woman, is that she is a “22-year old mother of two children.” He fails to mention her name – and if this is because he does not have the information or because it is not considered relevant also seems left to interpretation. It is interesting, however, that Harel, despite all, knows her number of children, and considers it relevant for the article.129

The latest article describing female Palestinian suicide bombers is of a different kind. In 2009 a group of artists created an exhibition in Tel Aviv named Woman, Mother, Murderer: An Exhibit of Female Terror. The artists used the faces of known Palestinian suicide bombers and stuck them on paintings of Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. This sparked many different feelings amongst the Israeli population and thus, Haaretz wrote an article about it. Even though the primary goal of this article is not to portray female suicide bombers, but to account for the exhibition and the feelings it provoked, the discourse used to talk of the exhibition is similar to the one used in narratives concerning violent women. Galina Bleikh, one of the artists involved in the project, claimed the point of the exhibition was to create a debate on why women engage in acts of violence. Bleikh asks: “how can a woman who comes into the world with the role of loving and giving life become a source of hatred and murder?” She also states: “the message is that the baby in the arms of a woman is in danger. The contrast of the symbol of love, the Madonna, with the face of a killer – it works. It hurts the soul of women who look at it.” This type of arguing is the same as the one found in the mother-narratives. Creating contrasts between the “normal”, “ideal” woman and the woman whose motherhood is flawed – who cannot be a good mother and instead turns to murder. Claiming that the exhibition “hurts the soul of women who look at it” is also a sign of viewing women as a collective, who are all presumed to feel the same. Further on in the interview, an Israeli doctor says the paintings will “become a hit in the Arab world”, which is also generalizing the interests of a population.130

3.4 Summary

All three newspapers show signs of using the mother, monster and whore narratives, addressing women as a collective group and having a primary focus on explaining women’s violence as caused by emotional factors. There are also a few contrasting articles offering a slightly different

129 Female bomber kills four Israelis at entrance to Gaza Strip, January 14th, 2004
130 Israel union drops exhibit portraying terrorists as Virgin Mary, September 3rd, 2009
perspective. However it is interesting to note that - despite many of the journalists speculating about the suicide bombers’ motives – not one of them addresses the fact that a few of the women actually made farewell videos. Ayat Akhrs and Andalib Takaftka did, as mentioned in chapter 2.1, express their opinions on women’s part in the political resistance[131] – and still, none of the articles examined in this study use this to argue that they may actually have had political motives.

In the New York Times it may be important to note that journalist James Bennet has written five of the nine articles reviewed. The mother narrative is present in his writing, illustrated by descriptions of Wafa Idris as a “volunteer medic who raised doves and adored children”[132] and his suggesting female suicide bombers choose their paths because they are unmarried or want to avenge their dead husbands.133 Alissa J. Rubin’s article about Baida and Ranya fits the monster narrative. Rubin constructs a “good story”, but when deconstructed it shows signs of subjective descriptions, serving to make the article more dramatic.134 Iraqi girl Ranya is portrayed as a stubborn child by both Rubin and female journalist Anwar Ali135, which seems to undermine her actions. Lindsey O’Rourke provides a different perspective on female suicide bombers by challenging the stereotype of the emotionally desperate woman. However, she is the only one of the journalist’s who uses the word “terrorist”.136 Overall there is hardly any mentioning of the female suicide bombers being motivated by politics. Many of the New York Times’ articles on this subject are a few pages long, with detailed portrayals of the women’s lives. There seems to be an interest in understanding these violent women – but this understanding is most commonly achieved through reviewing their family history and personal issues.

The Guardian covers the subject of female suicide bombers through shorter portrayals. “Divorced paramedic” is a reoccurring description of Wafa Idris.137 Peter Beaumont is one of the journalists who describes Idris in this way, and he uses short descriptions in an additional article, where he

131 Brunner 2005, p. 33
132 Arab Woman’s Path to Unlikely Martyrdom, January 31st 2002
133 MIDEAST TURMOIL: THE BOMBERS; Rash of New Suicide Bombers Exhibit No Patterns or Ties, June 21st 2002
134 How Baida wanted to die, August 16th 2009
135 How Baida wanted to die, August 16th 2009 and A Woman-to–Woman Talk With a Would-Be Suicide Bomber, November 17th 2009
136 Behind the Woman Behind the Bomb, August 2nd 2008
137 Female suicide bombers: Tamil Tiger teenage girl led the way, June 11th 2009 and Sisters, mothers, martyrs, December 5th 2004
summarizes female bombers’ mental status as “those who feel too much – or cannot feel at all.”\textsuperscript{138} Manuela Dviri writes an interesting article where she interviews would-be suicide bombers who are in prison, and she expresses her own feelings about her dead son. This results in a portrayal which seems affected by the journalist’s personal feelings towards the violent women.\textsuperscript{139} Libby Brooks addresses women as a collective, emphasizing their roles as “mothers, sisters, wives.” She explains how Palestinian women struggle in their daily lives and claims; “if there is a chance for Palestinian women to martyr themselves, they will.”\textsuperscript{140} In comparison with the New York Times, the Guardian publishes relatively brief articles concerning female suicide bombers. The lack of long, detailed descriptions makes the mothers, monsters and whores narratives less obvious, but adds to the impression of journalists generalizing women’s motives and viewing them as a collective group. A discussion about whether the female suicide bombers’ actions are political or not, is noticeably absent. The only really contrasting article is written by Rory McCarthy. He writes about Hamas’ women and what place they have in politics. This is the only case in which female suicide bombers and political empowerment are explicitly mentioned in the same article.\textsuperscript{141} The Guardian is the only one of these three papers that does not use the word “terrorist”.

Haaretz’ articles contain no deep analyses of the women’s lives and mentions no possibilities of the women having political motives. This may be explained by Haaretz being an Israeli newspaper. It is likely that its writer’s feel more directly affected by Palestinian suicide bombers, which is illustrated by what seems like a lack of interest in understanding how these women think. There is a noticeable focus on “quick answers”. Some texts highlight maternity and the connection between women and children. This is for example illustrated by Uri Ash’s article covering the suicide bombing in a restaurant in Haifa, where his interviewee asks; “why do they have to send a girl to blow herself up next to children?”\textsuperscript{142} Journalist Arnon Regular emphasizes divorce as a contributing or crucial factor affecting the women’s decisions to turn violent.\textsuperscript{143} There is a focus on personal reasons as the most important motives for women committing suicide bombings. Wafa Idris is described as so torn up by her voluntary work that it may have caused her to blow herself up.\textsuperscript{144} Many of the journalists portray the women as victims of the conservative

\textsuperscript{138} Suicide notes, December 22nd 2002
\textsuperscript{139} Women at the edge of destruction, February 7th 2005
\textsuperscript{140} Mothers of martyrdom, June 14th 2009
\textsuperscript{141} Sisters, mothers martyrs, December 5th 2004
\textsuperscript{142} There’s a reason I’m alive – I just don’t know what it is, May 25th 2004
\textsuperscript{143} The Palestinians see a “Joan of Arc”, February 10th 2002
\textsuperscript{144} “What good are rocks against tanks?”, January 31st 2002
Palestinian society¹⁴⁵ and use the terrorist concept frequently. The last article, about the art exhibition, gives an example of this type of discourse – the mother narrative and descriptions constructing a twisted maternity - being used in another environment besides the news media.¹⁴⁶ All the articles in Haaretz express similar opinions about the suicide bombers, there is no article offering a contrasting perspective, as has been the case with the two other newspapers.

¹⁴⁵ Female bombers show shift in thinking, May 21st 2003
¹⁴⁶ Israel union drops exhibit portraying terrorists as Virgin Mary, September 3rd 2009
4 Discussion

4.1 What about men?

In order to achieve a wider understanding for journalists’ gendered descriptions of suicide bombings, it is also important to look at how men are portrayed. Researcher Revital Sela-Shayovitz has studied three Israeli newspapers – Yedi’ot Aharonot, Ma’ariv and Haaretz – and summarized how female respectively male suicide bombers are described.\(^\text{147}\) Her findings include 29.7% of the females being described as “sensitive or delicate”, as opposed to 5.7% of the males. 77.2% of the women and 1.9% of the men were described as “crying, weeping, or screaming”, whilst 27.7% of the males and 12.5% of the females were given the attribute of “tough behavior.” Female suicide bombers’ marital status was mentioned in 79.8% of the cases, as opposed to 56.4% of articles concerning males.\(^\text{148}\) The women’s family history was mentioned in 76.6% of the cases, whilst only in 10.1% of the cases concerning male suicide bombers. On the topic of motives, religion was listed more often in the male cases (19.4% vs. 5.7%) and revenge was mentioned more in relation to the female cases (15.4% vs. 2.76%). Nationalism was the only motivating factor that was given both male and female suicide bombers, with 79.8% in the female cases and 77.2% in the male cases. Men were described as being involved in “terrorist organizations” more often than women (44.5% vs. 1.5%).\(^\text{149}\)

Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor have studied biographical accounts of 30 male and 30 female suicide bombers and reached conclusions similar to those of Sela-Shayovitz.\(^\text{150}\) They also argue that female suicide bombers are more associated with personal motivating factors, such as revenge, whilst male suicide bombers are considerably more associated with religion and nationalism.\(^\text{151}\)

\(^{148}\) ibid, p. 205
\(^{149}\) ibid, p. 206
\(^{151}\) ibid, p. 319
4.2 Mothers, Monsters, Whores and Masculine Values

As has can be seen in all three newspapers, the mother narrative is noticeably present. Wafa Idris’ divorce and supposed infertility,152 Hanadi Jaradat’s suicide bombing next to babies in Haifa153 and the Woman, Mother, Murderer-exhibition in Tel Aviv154 – they are all stories that connect the suicide bombers with their maternity. The violent women are defined by their motherhood in these portrayals. Sjoberg and Gentry explain this type of arguing as based on the assumption of motherhood being the most important part of a woman’s life; “their inability/failure to serve as mothers is so dehumanizing (or dewomanizing) that it drives a woman to violence.”155 The monster narrative is also present in some of these articles – perhaps most clearly illustrated in Rubin’s portrayal of Baida, who is pictured in an environment of psychologically damaged people and claimed to be excited when talking about killing Americans.156 The whore narrative has not been as common in these articles – none of the female suicide bombers have been described as sexual killers. The only slightly sexual reference is made by James Bennet at the New York Times, who very shortly claims that an Israeli man was killed after a Palestinian woman flirted with him by email and lured him into a “lethal trap.”157 Sjoberg and Gentry label infertility as a sexual dysfunction, which is included in the whore narrative,158 and that has been mentioned by many of the journalists in the case of Wafa Idris. Still, apart from that, there have been no obvious portrayals of the female suicide bombers where their violence is sexualized.

Sjoberg and Gentry argue that, in the end, it makes no difference whether it is the mother, monster or the whore narrative that is used. They all lead up to the same result; distinguishing violent women from “ideal” or “real” women. In different ways, violent women are portrayed in a way that creates an image of them as being mentally disturbed. Whether it is done by describing them as desperate mothers murdering babies, as criminally insane or as sexualized victimizers, it

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152 For a few examples, see: Arab Woman’s Path to Unlikely ‘Martyrdom’, January 31st 2002, From an angel of mercy to an angel of death, January 31st 2002 and Female bombers show shift in thinking, May 21st 2003
153 There’s a reason I’m alive – I just don’t know what it is, May 25th 2004
154 Israel union drops exhibit portraying terrorists as Virgin Mary, September 3rd 2009
155 Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, p. 33
156 How Baida wanted to die, August 16th 2009
157 Arab Woman’s Path to Unlikely ‘Martyrdom’, January 31st 2002
158 Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, p. 46-48
makes their choices seem like no choices at all. The possibility of violent women acting out of political reasons is often left unmentioned, as is seen in the articles reviewed in this study.\textsuperscript{159}

Regarding the discourse constituted in the newspaper articles, it is interesting to note not just the information being given – but the information being left out. Sjoberg and Gentry point out that choosing only to address certain issues – such as divorce, children and broken families – is also making a statement about the topics that go unmentioned. If politics and gender are widely left out of media articles concerning female suicide bombers, it is indirectly stating that those aspects are unimportant.\textsuperscript{160} An example of this is when James Bennet, at the New York Times, addresses a female suicide bomber only as a “mother of a 3-year old”.\textsuperscript{161} Bennet does not mention her name, nor does he write anything else about her life – except the age of her child. Why this fact is of importance, and nothing else, is hard to say – but Bennet is making a statement whether he intends to or not, signaling that the most important fact in this situation is that the suicide bomber is the mother of a young child. The same can be said for Rory McCarthy at the Guardian, who calls Wafa Idris a “divorced paramedic.”\textsuperscript{162} Idris marriage status and her job are summarized in this short description, and McCarthy does not offer any additional information about her. When these are the only facts being revealed about Wafa Idris, in the context of her suicide bombing, it signals that this information has something to do with why she blew herself up. At least they become the two attributes which define her, and nowhere does the writer mention anything about her actions having a political agenda.

When viewing media narratives of violent women from a feminist perspective, it is not the interest in femininity and womanhood that is disturbing. Rather, it is the way journalists so frequently use the norms of femininity to create explanations of how these women turned into killers.\textsuperscript{163} Using the mother, monster and whore narratives makes the woman’s decision seem like it has sprung out of a biological flaw. It seldom addresses her intellect and capacity of making rational choices.\textsuperscript{164} Sjoberg and Gentry conclude; “across the world, stories tell away, marginalize and trivialize women’s violence.”\textsuperscript{165}

\textsuperscript{159} ibid, p. 51
\textsuperscript{160} ibid, p. 52
\textsuperscript{161} MIDDEAST TURMOIL: THE BOMBERS; Rash of New Suicide Bombers Exhibit No Pattern or Ties, June 21st 2002
\textsuperscript{162} Sisters, Mothers, Martyrs, December 5th 2004
\textsuperscript{163} Sjoberg & Gentry 2007, p. 52-53
\textsuperscript{164} ibid, p. 50
\textsuperscript{165} ibid, p. 57
Maggie Wykes argues that the reason why violent women can be portrayed in this way lies within the cultural hegemony where masculine values have been naturalized. She claims that many journalists are unaware of the discourse they constitute, because it is built upon masculine interests. These interests remain natural until someone with a different perspective actively deconstructs the journalists’ use of language.¹⁶⁶ When the discourse used in specific media – such as the three newspapers reviewed in this study – is built upon gendered assumptions about violence, sprung from dominant masculine values, it explains why both male and female journalists write gendered portrayals of female suicide bombers.

¹⁶⁶ Wykes 1998, p. 244
5 Conclusion

This thesis shows that the New York Times, the Guardian and Haaretz all contain gendered descriptions of female suicide bombings. The journalists construct images of women in relation to their (potential) motherhood and in some cases also portray them as monsters – psychologically damaged and out of control. However, it is not only journalists at these newspapers who constitute this type of gendered discourse – there are also a number of researchers who have written narratives concerning these women, which in their turn reproduce a perception of female suicide bombers being motivated by personal reasons rather than politics. I do not mean to suggest that no female suicide bomber has ever been motivated by a failed marriage or a wish to avenge murdered relatives – there may of course have been cases where those factors were been of importance. Still, I feel the need to challenge the pattern that is visible amongst the books and articles portraying female suicide bombers. In this study the gendered descriptions of female violence being personal and not political is highly noticeable, and I argue that the discourse used by journalists and researchers must become more nuanced in order to avoid trivializing female violence.

Yuval-Davies argues that in order to give women an equal place alongside men in male-dominated areas, we cannot view the world’s population simply as men and women. To achieve justice, and to avoid generalizing, we must view violent women not as a collective but as individuals created out of a number of different social factors. Ethnicity, class, nationalism, age – there are a number of different aspects that make us who we are and sex is just one of them. Yuval-Davies argues that without taking notice of these social relations, our perception of both women and men in global politics will be incomplete and misleading. Sjoberg and Gentry are convinced that the way violent women are portrayed by the media affects women’s position in international politics. Wafa Idris is an example, as she has become a famous face of Palestinian female suicide bombers. As seen in the articles from the New York Times, the Guardian and Haaretz, Idris is the main character of many of the narratives surrounding female suicide bombers. She has affected the journalistic practice and she affected the Israeli and the Palestinian

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167 The researchers I am referring to are mainly Barbara Victor, Mia Bloom and Katharina von Knop.
168 Yuval-Davies 1997, p. 115
population. Therefore, the way she is described also affects women choosing her path and the way a larger group of females are viewed in international politics.

Gendered descriptions and “dramatic” narratives portraying violent women in ways that make a “good story” must be recognized as having an effect on women’s place in international politics. The discourse being used, in articles reviewed in this thesis, reproduces gender norms and hierarchies, where women’s violence is trivialized and presumed to be personal rather than a political statement. I therefore argue that neglecting women’s actions in international politics – whichever nature they may be of – makes our perception of society incomplete.
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