When "Empowerment" Becomes a Weapon: A Personal Analysis

Chloe Baker[1]

Former Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Yasser Arafat once called the "womb of Palestinian women" the greatest weapon of the Palestinian people (Erez and Laster 2019).

But what happens when a woman cannot use this so-called "weapon" for the nationalist cause? Wafa Idris, the first female suicide bomber in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, faced exactly this dilemma. When informed she could not have children, her husband divorced her (Sofer and Addison 2012). Stripped of her ability to bear the next generation of *shahids*, Idris found another way to support Palestinian resistance: by becoming a *shahida* herself. In January 2002, she detonated herself on Jaffa Street in Jerusalem, killing one and injuring over 140, an act of terror whose human cost cannot be separated from the analysis that will follow. While media outlets in the West described Idris as "socially deviant," Palestinian media "celebrate[d] her act of martyrdom, ...regarding her as 'the ultimate form of motherhood: the mother of Palestine'" (Hamamra 2018). Her face appeared on posters, she was honored in poems (Palestinian Media Watch 2019), and a library at a children's hospital in Yemen was even named for her (MEMRI 2009); she was celebrated more in death than she was in life.

The tension between the language of female power and the reality of female utility in Palestinian society is at the heart of how these terrorist groups recruit, motivate, and celebrate women. These groups do not simply permit women to participate in violence; they package and brand it as liberation.

It's no secret that Palestinian society wouldn't win first place in a competition geared toward embracing progressivism. Personal Status Laws rooted in Shari'a govern marriage, divorce, and inheritance—and they do not favor women (Richter-Devroe 2011). Men may take up to four wives, while women cannot marry without a male guardian's permission. Daughters inherit half of what sons do, and often receive nothing at all. Divorce laws overwhelmingly favor men, leaving women to relinquish financial security just to legally exit a marriage (United Nations Development Programme 2018). In the political sphere, women have the legal right to vote and run for office, but remain vastly underrepresented in Palestinian leadership (UN Women 2022). Traditional gender norms continue to dictate women's roles in the home and community, and honor-based practices still govern how women are treated, particularly in regard to sexuality and public behavior.

Life under Hamas rule is arguably worse. Women are heavily encouraged to dress conservatively (Ma'an News Agency 2009), to the extent that female journalists who refuse to wear hijabs become victims

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of violence (Palestinian Media Watch 2021). In 2013, Hamas chose to cancel the UNRWA Gaza marathon rather than permit women to participate (UNRWA 2013). And in 2021, Hamas barred unmarried women from traveling without a male guardian, referring to either her husband or father (Akram 2021).

These are not incidental restrictions. Rather, they are entrenched in an institution that creates a system in which women's autonomy and choice is kept on a tight leash. Women's public presence is conditional, and their worth is significantly determined by their relationship to men and the Palestinian national cause. Martyrdom is presented as empowerment and independence, and this messaging is effective. In a society which has foreclosed most other typical routes to recognition and praise, the offer of honor through martyrdom is more than appealing.

Across propaganda posters, public murals, and Palestinian Authority-sponsored school textbooks, a consistent pattern emerges. Female agency is portrayed as real, honorable, and attainable, but only through martyrdom, nationalist sacrifice, or participation in violence.

Reem Riyashi, a Hamas suicide bomber, is depicted in official Hamas imagery cradling her toddler in one arm and a rifle in the other, her identity morphed into a single symbol of maternal militancy (Dahal 2020). Before her attack, she recorded herself expressing her longing to have her "shredded limbs" become "shrapnel, tearing Zionists to pieces" (McLaughlin 2012). The Head of Hamas's Women's Movement, Rajaa al-Halabi, conveyed to women that their highest honor is achieved through this ultimate sacrifice, claiming that "all women of Hamas and Gaza would become suicide bombers if asked" (MEMRI 2021). A mural of teenage suicide bomber Ayat al-Akhras adorns the exterior wall of a school in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp south of Bethlehem, where children pass by every single day. This offers a direct example of how militant iconography penetrates the everyday spaces of childhood. In the West Bank town of Burqa, the Palestinian NGO Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC) named a youth community center after Dalal al-Mughrabi, a Palestinian terrorist who led one of the most vicious attacks in Israel's history, killing 37 Israelis, among them 12 children (Marcus and Zilberdik 2017).

In a fourth-grade Palestinian Authority sponsored textbook, an illustration accompanies a poem in which a young girl in uniform walks on a blood-soaked path toward Jerusalem (IMPACT-se 2017). The poem espouses her worth as being defined entirely by what she is willing to destroy for the cause. In another textbook, a staged protest scene is depicted showing women holding signs reading "Freedom for Prisoners" and "We Will Not Forget Our Prisoners," demanding the release of individuals imprisoned by Israel for violent acts (Pardo 2017). This is an empowerment that is strictly conditional; the notion that visibility and participation are sanctioned only when women support the dominant nationalist narrative leaves no space for alternative or oppositional viewpoints.

This is what weaponized empowerment looks like. It borrows the vocabulary of agency – honor, recognition, purpose, and motherhood – and

attaches it exclusively to violence. It tells women they matter, while ensuring the only way to truly matter is by dying for the cause. The message is carefully constructed in media, posters and school textbooks. Terrorist organizations show that martyrdom is sacred, sacrifice is a feminine virtue, and death in service of the cause is the ultimate form of self-actualization.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that authentic autonomy requires more than the absence of just physical chains (Stoljar 2024). It requires the presence of conditions in which rational, self-directed choice is actually possible. Real education, freedom from manipulation, and recognition of one's worth as a human being rather than as an instrument of destruction are all essential factors that need to be present in a society where free will is possible. By Kantian standards, what these organizations offer women is not empowerment. It is precisely the inverse — the deliberate instrumentalization of women in service of ideological ends, masqueraded in the language of honor, sacrifice, and recognition. Kant understood that the most insidious constraints on autonomy are not always external chains, but rather internal ones. The adoption of values and self-conceptions that were never freely chosen, but carefully installed.

Throughout my research, a question I kept returning to was whether or not these women truly understood the nature of the choice they were making. Knowing that women who live under extremism are subject to profound structural oppression, I struggled with understanding whether women who gave their lives to terror truly understood the nature of the choice they were making. Did they act as an escape from an unbearable reality? Or did they genuinely, freely choose destruction?

Through my research, I encountered testimonies of female Palestinian suicide bombers, accounts from female Palestinian prisoners convicted of terror-based offenses, and videos of ordinary women praising martyrdom or vowing to repeat the acts of October 7 "again and again and again." At first, I thought I might conclude that not all women who commit acts of terror do so with malicious, premeditated intent. But after reviewing this material, my perspective shifted. I came to believe that these women do know exactly what they are doing, but I do not see that as the end of the analysis. I do not view them as victims of a cause. I view them as victims of the circumstances that shaped them: inadequate education, systemic indoctrination, and a society that glorifies destruction and celebrates terror as the highest form of honor.

This is where Kantian autonomy becomes not just a theoretical framework but a deeply human question. We can only make choices based on the information available to us, our lived experience, and the context in which we inhabit. If you live in a world where terror is what you are taught, what you see in the media, and what you are raised to aspire to – as the media examined in this article illustrate – are you truly making a free choice? Kant would say no. Genuine autonomy requires not just the absence of physical coercion, but access to the conditions in which rational, self-directed reasoning is actually possible. When those conditions are denied from childhood, the choices that follow are not free, they are installed.

This research answered some questions, but it ultimately generated more. It reinforced my belief that education is among the most powerful tools for building a better world – and that the most insidious form of oppression is one that convinces its subjects they are free. What kind of education would be necessary to change the status quo and open the possibility of genuinely different choices? What responsibility do we – as students, researchers, or simply as citizens who care – have in shaping that? I don't yet have a full answer. But I have a sharper awareness of the complexity, and a conviction that these are questions always worth asking.

Lasting peace cannot be built while this architecture of indoctrination remains intact. A generation raised on textbooks that depict blood-soaked paths to Jerusalem, on murals outside their schools glorifying suicide bombers, on a culture that celebrates martyrdom as the highest aspiration is a generation whose capacity to imagine a different, brighter future, is gone.

The most dangerous propaganda is not the kind that commands. It is the kind that convinces you it is setting you free.

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