5

Autonomy, Value and Violence: Assessing Substantive Accounts of Autonomy

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Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to consider the question of the autonomy of women who perpetrate violence, in particular, women who have committed or tried to commit suicide bombing attacks. My focus will be on Palestinian women who have carried out such violence against Israeli targets. One question we might have about the women’s choices is whether or not they are autonomous. According to one account of autonomy, such choices are not autonomous. I will argue that this does not do justice to the diversity of circumstances under which women exercise agency in perpetrating violence.

In doing so I also aim to articulate and assess the structure of substantive accounts of autonomy. These accounts of autonomy place constraints on what can be autonomously chosen: choices which are informed by certain norms cannot be autonomous. These accounts stand in contrast to content-neutral accounts which maintain that anything can, in principle, be autonomously chosen – what matters is that certain procedural conditions on choice are met. Feminist philosophers have argued that a substantive account must be endorsed in order to make sense of intuitions concerning women’s compromised autonomy under conditions of oppression (Stoljar 2000. See also Hill Jnr 1991, Baron 1985).

By drawing on and critically evaluating the analysis of these women’s choices advanced by Friedman (2008), Ness (2008), Schweitzer (2008) and Berko and Erez (2008), I will assess whether substantive accounts are defensible. In so doing, the aim is also to bring to light the complexity of the conditions in which these women’s choices are made, and the difficulties
of coming to an adequate understanding of them. I will conclude that substantive accounts have problematic implications; they do not posit defensible conditions for autonomy, and may serve to reinforce the problematic view that women who perpetrate violence lack agency.

**Palestinian women perpetrating terror attacks**

In this section, I set out some of the recent findings, including from interviews, about the conditions in and motivations with which some Palestinian women have chosen to commit terrorist attacks.

The terror attacks undertaken by Palestinian women against Israeli civilian targets have taken place in the context of ongoing and violent disputes over the territorial rights of the state of Israel and the Palestinian peoples. Viewing the Israeli presence as an unjustified occupation, some Palestinian groups have employed strategies of terrorism in furtherance of various ends: to end the perceived occupation; to establish a self-determining Palestinian state; to exact vengeance upon Israeli citizens; to draw national and international attention to their cause (Friedman 2008, 47; Schweitzer 2008, 138) to defend against existential threat; to prompt Israeli citizens to question the policies of the Israeli government (Kapitan 2008, 26–27).

Both fundamentalist religious groups (such as Hamas) and secular groups (such as Al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade) have orchestrated terror attacks against Israeli citizens (Friedman 2008, 48–49, Berko and Erez 2008, 153). The conservative norms surrounding gender in Palestinian society in general, and in some fundamentalist political groups involved in terror attacks, have shaped women’s participation in political activities and in terrorist activities. Women have often been involved in supporting roles, rather than orchestration of or participation in political activity (Ness 2008, 26). This also means that women who have sought to become involved in terrorist activities have often had to act contrary to prevailing gender norms. Ness writes that ‘in cultures where gender roles are traditional, it is that much more incumbent on women and girls to improvise techniques by which they can carry out their missions’ (p. 15).

In Palestine, the norms surrounding women’s participation in political campaigns and terrorist missions somewhat changed in 2002, when Yasser Arafat (then leader of the political group Fatah) emphasized the equality of women and men in the Palestinian struggle, calling up an ‘army of roses that will crush Israeli tanks’ (Victor 2003, 19). On that same day, Wafa Idris, on behalf of Al-Aqsa Martyr’s Brigade, became the first successful woman to execute a suicide bombing, killing one and