

## Female Suicide Bombers Are Latest War Tactic

Advertisement

By Sudarsan Raghavan  
Washington Post Foreign Service  
Wednesday, September 17, 2008; A01

BAQUBAH, [Iraq](#) -- Shortly after the Muslim sunset prayer, the beggar approached Naeem Jabbar as he stepped out of his car. She was no more than 19 years old. He was a leader of the Awakening, a U.S.-backed force that has helped improve security in Iraq. For the past four months, Jabbar had given the young woman food and money, enabling her to survive until the next day.

"He trusted her," said Jabbar's brother, Muntasar. "We never searched her."

On this evening in July, hidden under her black garments, she wore a vest filled with explosives, nails and ball bearings. As her benefactor greeted her, she triggered the bomb, killing him, four others and herself.

U.S. and Iraqi officials say Sunni insurgent groups, especially [al-Qaeda in Iraq](#), are using religion, money and empty promises to persuade sometimes vulnerable women to conduct suicide attacks, highlighting the movement's desperation at a time when its influence and ranks have declined. Efforts by the [U.S. military](#) and Iraq's neighbors have limited the number of Arab fighters reaching Iraq, a flow that was once the major source of recruits willing to commit suicide.

But extremists say the women are acting on their own motives, including ideology and revenge, and describe the female bombers as the latest tactic in a slow-burning war.

Since the 2003 invasion, 53 Iraqi women have either carried out suicide attacks or were apprehended before they could do so, according to the U.S. military. The attacks have killed more than 370 people and injured 650. This year, there have been 31 female bombers, including 17 in Diyala province, northeast of Baghdad. The youngest bomber was 13, according to U.S. military statistics.

Two weeks ago, police in Baqubah, Diyala's capital, captured a woman with reddish-brown hair wearing what appeared to be an explosives-laden vest. She said that her name was Rania and that she was born in 1993. In an interrogation captured on a police video obtained by [The Washington Post](#), she said a woman had wrapped the vest on her body and told her to take it off at home.

"Why did you come to blow yourself up?" asked [Maj. Gen. Abdul-Karim Khalaf](#), the chief spokesman for [Iraq's Interior Ministry](#), who was in Baqubah to help oversee an offensive against insurgents.

"I swear to Allah, they did not tell me to explode myself," Rania replied.

Another police officer demanded to know why she threw down the bomb's triggering device when police caught her.

"I did not," she said. "It may have fallen from me. I have no idea about these things."

The police pressed Rania for the name and location of the woman who had given her the vest. Rania said she didn't know the woman's exact address.

"If you do not know the address, I will execute you at the gate," Khalaf said.

The police have yet to arrest the woman. Rania remains in prison.

## Driven by Hate, Revenge

In a village east of Fallujah in Anbar province, a veiled, olive-skinned woman described herself as the second in command of the Naseeba al-Ansariya Martyrdom Battalion. The unit is an arm of the [Islamic State of Iraq](#), an umbrella group created by the insurgent group al-Qaeda in Iraq.

She said the 20 members of the group, formed in November, were would-be suicide bombers who were the wives, sisters or daughters of insurgents killed by U.S. or Iraqi forces.

Contacted through previously successful means of reaching members of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the woman gave her name as Um Islam and agreed to speak to a Post special correspondent on condition that her real name and precise location not be mentioned.

Women, she said, had long been involved in the Sunni insurgency. Some came from other countries with husbands who were determined to become fighters in Iraq. The women treated wounded insurgents and carried explosives belts underneath their garments, taking advantage of conservative Muslim traditions, Um Islam said.

A U.S. military intelligence official said he had no knowledge of Arab women accompanying their husbands to Iraq.

"Searching women at the time was a red line, and there were no women guards searching other women at the checkpoints," explained Um Islam, an Iraqi who said her husband was killed by U.S. forces last year.

But as fighters died in increasing numbers, she said, "hatred and a sense of revenge" drove their widows to rise up against the Americans.

She said those who wish to join the battalion, whose name honors a female warrior of the prophet Muhammad's time, are introduced by references. "She needs to put her wish to meet God and her loved ones in Paradise above her wish to support the faith and liberate the land from the usurpers," Um Islam said of a potential recruit.

"We have one woman who is pregnant and is now waiting to deliver," she added, "after which she will be in line for a martyrdom operation."

## 'A Winning Card'

U.S. military intelligence officials said they are unaware of a unit of female suicide bombers; Iraqi officials said they think there are networks of female operatives. Both the Americans and Iraqis acknowledged that revenge is a key motive and said women were being used instead of male fighters.

"There's a definite correlation between pressure we've put on [al-Qaeda](#), in stopping funding and stopping foreign fighters from coming into Iraq, and the rise in female suicide attacks," said Col. Scott Maw, a U.S. military intelligence officer.

Abu Abdul Aziz al-Mohammadi, an al-Qaeda leader in Anbar, conceded that women are being recruited because there were fewer Arab fighters. Many male Iraqi insurgents, he added, are less willing to "die in car bombs or wear explosives belts."

"We consider the women's battalion a winning card which has not been used effectively up to now," Mohammadi said. "They have a penchant for vengeance more than men sometimes. Also, a woman blowing herself up applies pressure on the men who refuse to do the same."

In Diyala, most female bombers hail from small villages where al-Qaeda insurgents have sought havens. The women are often uneducated and live in a male-dominated society where they are considered second-class citizens. Here, religion, duty and honor are often tools of manipulation, Iraqi officials said.

"In these villages, the tradition is for women to blindly obey the man, their husband, father or brother. To convince these women to commit suicide attacks is easy," said Lt. Gen. Abdul Karim Rubaie, who oversees military operations in Diyala.

Some women, he said, are wives or girlfriends who have been abandoned by al-Qaeda leaders and ostracized by their communities.

"These women become broken," Rubaie said. "Nobody will marry her. No one respects her. She commits a suicide bombing to get rid of the criticism in her society and the isolation. The pressure comes from relatives, not friends."

Some bombers have been tricked into committing bombings. In March, two women with Down syndrome were used in an attack on a crowded market in Baghdad, and in May, a 14-year-old girl in Baqubah was strapped with an explosives vest that was detonated by remote control, Iraqi officials said.

In some instances, impoverished women have been promised assistance for their families if they become bombers. "There has been a lot of pressure from al-Qaeda leadership on women," Maw said. "There have been promises of money to the family, although we have not seen one incident where that has played out."

In Baghdad, the fear of female bombers has persuaded officials to create the National Institute for Handicapped and Special Needs, a school for children with mental impairments that is funded by U. S. reconstruction money.

Girls and boys are given an hour's lesson every week on how to identify Iraq's dangers. On a recent day, teachers drew stick diagrams of insurgents on whiteboards and posted colorful crayon drawings of bombs and other explosives on walls.

"This is an explosives belt. Don't ever get close to it," teacher Zena Abbas told the class. "If a stranger comes to you and gives you a toy or money and asks you to put on an explosives belts, say no. He wants you to blow yourself up and die. And then you will hurt many people for no reason."

Some children nodded. Others appeared confused.

### **'I've Been Framed'**

In a Baqubah prison, Ikram Ismail stands accused of using her two daughters to recruit their girlfriends to become bombers. Her husband had been jailed in Camp Bucca, a U.S. detention facility in southern Iraq, for the past three years. Both her sons, police officials said, were al-Qaeda operatives killed by American and Iraqi forces.

Wide-faced with large expressive eyes, the 50-year-old housewife denied she had any links to al-Qaeda or any desire to orchestrate suicide bombings.

"No mother would think like this," Ismail said.

Police intelligence officials said they found al-Qaeda in Iraq propaganda leaflets and two letters incriminating Ismail during a raid on her house. Phone numbers for several women were jotted down on one leaflet. When a police official called one, a woman answered and demanded a password.

In one letter, Ismail's daughter Asma wrote to her father that she wanted to join her brothers Muhammed and Omar in Heaven. "I am thinking of an eternal meeting. I will go before you and meet my brothers," the letter said, according to Khalaf, the Interior Ministry spokesman.

The second letter was addressed to Um Omar, or "mother of Omar." It was from Abu Dawood, who police officials say is an al-Qaeda in Iraq leader, praising her work for the Islamic State of Iraq, Khalaf said.

"I don't read or write," Ismail said. "I've been framed. I swear to God I am innocent."

Maj. Hisham Ali Khalifa al-Timimi, a police intelligence officer, insisted otherwise. "She was preparing to blow herself up," he said, seated at his desk in front of a thick file. "Al-Qaeda is smart. They know how to brainwash such women."

But a judge decided there wasn't enough evidence to hold Ismail's two daughters and released them. That bothered Timimi, who wanted to keep them jailed.

"Why? If she goes and blows herself up, everyone will blame the security forces," he said, referring to Asma. "They will ask, 'Why didn't the system stop her?'"

## **Widows at Checkpoints**

In Abarra, a suburb of Baqubah, women are trying to stop other women from committing suicide attacks. Scores have signed up to become Daughters of Iraq, a U.S. military-funded program that pays women to search other women at checkpoints. Many of the recruits are widows whose husbands were killed by Sunni insurgents or Shiite militias. They receive a week of training and \$280 monthly salaries.

On a recent day, Thikra Abid Dawood, 37, was working at a checkpoint, frisking women and searching their purses. Over her black abaya, she wore a yellow band signifying her membership in the Daughters of Iraq. Al-Qaeda had abducted her husband more than a year ago, said the mother of four.

"My husband left me nothing. I needed a job," she said. But it was also a matter of avenging his death. "I was hit by terrorism. I hope to help stop it."

Five days after the death of Jabbar, the Awakening leader, his wife gave birth to a daughter. Last month, Baidaa Muhammed, 30, sat in their living room, in front of a gold-framed photo of her husband. The baby was named Hibatullah, or "gift from God."

As Hibatullah rested in her lap wrapped in a white blanket, Muhammed, her face streaked with tears, declared: "I hate women."

*Special correspondents in Baqubah and Anbar province contributed to this report.*

**Post a Comment**

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company