

INVISIBLE MARTYRS

*Inside the Secret World
of Female Islamic Radicals*

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“Whoever saves one life, saves all of humanity.”

—THE QURAN 5:32

“Those who are merciful will be shown mercy by the Most Merciful. Be merciful to those on the earth and the One above the heavens will have mercy upon you.”

—MUHAMMAD, the Prophet of Islam

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AWAKENING

For years, I dreamed of hijackings on airplanes. In my dreams, men with dark eyes wore black masks and wielded sharp weapons. They spoke a language I vaguely understood and made plans to strike a passenger. At that moment, I rose from my seat to announce my faith: “*La illaha illa la Muhammadan rasulilah.*” (“There is no God but God and Muhammad is His Prophet.”) I said it three times. The masked men stopped. They looked at each other. They didn’t know what to say or do. I clutched the scarf I had pulled out of my handbag and recited the first lines in the Quran, “The Opening Verse.” The men remained standing, motionless, until someone said in Gulf-accented Arabic, “Who are you?”

In the dreams, Sara was always next to me. We have been together for as long as I can remember. We went to the same college in Texas, overlooking hill country, and then I followed her to the same graduate school in Washington, DC. We both joined the Counterterrorism Center. We have so much in common: we love to travel to the Middle East, write and speak on foreign policy issues, and learn foreign languages—Sara mastered Pashto, the tongue of the Afghans—and we both love mint tea. If I had a blond-haired sister, it would be Sara. Which is why I’m not surprised that she is always with me in the hijacking dream or when I have terrible visions of being kidnapped by masked murderers—all of whom are Muslim—and I pretend to be the Muslim heroine by saving Sara.

Looking back, I know that the dark dreams forced me to focus on the mission. Each morning, I donned a business suit and gold

jewelry and drove twenty minutes from my home to Langley, Virginia. The guards looked the same. The glass building glistened in the morning light. My key card, which let me through security and into my vaulted office, had the same royal blue background with a younger-looking me—an innocent version of myself when I had just embarked on the career that would change and challenge me in unimaginable ways.

On most days, when Sara was not traveling overseas, we would talk about our lives. Our parents were in Texas—her family lived in Houston, and my parents had lived in the same house in Austin for more than thirty years. She asked me about my baby boy. I began my career as a young mother at the age of twenty-five. We talked about our work too—the terrorists’ profiles and the countries where the men were from. Before 9/11, intelligence analysts investigated mostly men because women were largely invisible; we later learned that women would play a vital role in terrorist organizations as supporters, sympathizers, and staunch loyalists. Few women would commit suicide attacks.

We exchanged stories on the places we visited and the police officers, security personnel, and government elites we met in foreign countries. We treasured the gifts we gave to one another. During her trip to Israel, Sara took a picture of Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, a holy city where Muslims believe Prophet Muhammad ascended to Heaven to speak to God. Years later, she gifted me “The Verse of the Throne,” known as *Ayatul Kursi*, written in large golden letters on black cloth sealed in a golden-glass frame.

When we worked together, Sara and I shared our secrets. She helped me, a young Muslim woman. What she couldn’t do was help me understand Islam and provide answers to questions that I asked every time Muslims perpetrated a terrorist attack: Why do Muslims commit violence in the name of their religion? What does Islam say about jihad? And why am I the *only* Muslim woman here?

For years, I listened, learned, and lived with the words spoken by violent extremists. When the voices of terrorists haunted my dreams, and nights became hallucinatory, I found comfort in the silence of open spaces: the solitude of faith inside an empty mosque, deep evergreen forests and the blue waters of Dal Lake in my grand-

mother's homeland, the fields of golden brown in a Texan summer, a long road cobbled with shrubs and threaded with wandering tree roots in northern Pakistan, and the red barn situated on land with plum trees and grazed by horses that I loved as a child in Tennessee, my first American home before moving to Texas. The person I used to be longed for order—a child with a memory of fleeting images and faith in the benevolent blue sky of the American Southwest wanted the world to remain blue, green, translucent; as Henry David Thoreau said, “All good things are wild and free.”

Even as I tried to forget the attacks by Muslims and the images of death and destruction they caused, the actions of a radical few evoked an endless torrent of rage that kept alive a cacophony of voices inside my head, warning me to fight back—as a Muslim, a woman, and an American. It was overwhelming. No one taught me how to stay strong or how to hide my fury toward our enemies. No one helped me to overcome my awkwardness when probed by members of my faith-based community about what I did and where I worked. Quietly, I covered my agitation and survived those early years as a woman on edge—always waiting for the next attack.

I remembered a prayer that my mother chanted when she first experienced the ugliness of war in her birth country of Pakistan: *Be constantly occupied with listening to God. Believe that He has a purpose for you.* The only way I knew how to deal with difficulties, such as the allegation that Islam is a violent faith, was to surrender my happiness to the clarity that came from a daily practice of Islam: a simple hum at the break of dawn, the memory of serene mosques surrounded by gardens and huge rectangular pools, and an unmoved conviction in poetry.

As I learned more about Islam, I also began to look deeply at the profiles of terrorist women. The oft-repeated question of why they did it forced me to look beyond the “push and pull” drivers of violent extremism. I had to humanize the girls and women who committed savage crimes. I had to admit to myself that not all violent women were delusional, disturbed, depressed, or distracted—that they could be rational too. I had to find a way to know *them*, the women of terror, if I was going to understand a life broken by death—a world surreal to me but real and romantic to them. Perhaps they were

trapped in an endless dream, imagining a paradisiacal place with pink clouds and the intensity of light defined as the touch of God.

In time, the agonizing dreams stopped. I did not see Sara or myself captured, tortured, or, worse, raped by maniacs shouting religious verse. Images perceived between light and shadow diminished. The deathbed colors of nighttime visions faded, and I suspect that my original desire to be a Muslim heroine in the face of terror drifted as soon as I realized that there was another way to save myself from the tormentors.

When the nightmares subsided, I could see beyond the fragmented conversations of masked men who came to me as apparitions. I could see that my faith was meant to be simple, rational, and practical. Islam is a clear and simple faith, not a complex set of beliefs and principles that reserve Paradise for the chosen few. I realized that terrorists dismissed a history of compassion and mercy preached by the prophets and messengers sent by God.

In my search for the truth, I would listen to saints and study the teachings of Islam, trying to understand why extremists distorted the faith. In time, I would learn how to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate reasons for taking up arms and the role of Muslim women in conflict. After leaving the US government and in the years to come, I would give lectures on Muslim responses to violence, telling stories with statistical proof that the majority of Muslims believe in and live by the Prophet's earlier *hadith*, or oral tradition: "Those who are merciful will be shown mercy by the Most Merciful. Be merciful to those on the earth, and the One above the heavens will have mercy upon you."

To crush extremism, I preached what I believed to be true: that a *lived* Islam is the answer to violent extremism and today's increasing far-right-wing movement. Earlier messengers taught me that a practice of self-awareness, self-devotion, and a selflessness that honors God and the country I call home is founded on the principle of mercy—the attribute that enables people to replace bigotry with benevolence, prejudice with patience, and chauvinism with consent. If there's anything I've learned from my counterterrorism work, it is that extremism of any kind expunges clarity, charity, and compassion from citizenry.

Undoubtedly, violent extremism is one of the most complex subjects of the modern century. The reasons why women commit acts of violence are multifaceted. The diversity of Muslim women is often explained in extreme contrast: modernity and antiquity, luxury and poverty, sensuality and asceticism, tenderness and violence; a multiplicity of cultures, clans, families, and tribes describe the “Muslim woman.” She is a product of local cultures, traditions, histories, and politics. In this book of stories and prose, even violent Muslim women are more than the constructs of patriarchal practice or norms codified by men.

This book is about what happened when I discovered Islam through the women who distorted it with violence, as they helped me untangle and unravel the tenets of my faith. Through them, I found best practices and policies to counter violent extremism. I discovered intervention strategies that are slowly helping women hold on to faith as they struggle with versions of orthodox Islam polluted by extremist interpretations. And in the process, I discovered a gentle Islam and more about myself as a woman of faith.

The more I studied violent women, the more I realized that there were multiple, if not parallel, realities, and the best I could hope for was a near-complete story of the women who kill. Trying to figure out the motives of female killers was an addiction, and I was badly hooked. So this is how I began this book: with the belief that the ink of the scholar is mightier than the blood of the sword, an Islamic teaching posted on the wall of my office. As a Muslim woman with a counterterrorism background, I became obsessed with the question of *why now?* Why are some women drawn to violence? To find the answer, I started talking to women and their men. I listened to hundreds of people talk about their passage to God. Some chose the path of violence as they struggled with religion and identity, while other women offered solutions for peace and supported women’s rights as a counter to violent men.

I believed I would find the answers to the questions that tormented my childhood and young adulthood if I entered the world of conflict to understand the rationale for extremism. Mine was a personal quest to find the larger, grander narratives of violence; the histories of beliefs contained within families; and the biographies

of women that would be revealed in a language of song, verse, and metaphors. I had to accept the way in which stories were enfolded within other stories and learn to listen to the terrible, fatal truths in a time of war.

This book is personal because terrorism is personal. I learned this vital truth at home through the details of my mother's life in Pakistan described in chapter 1. Because Mama was willing to fight in a military uniform to free Kashmir, she was my first woman warrior. After I left home and joined the US government, I learned a great deal about women, young and old, willing to die for a cause. I drafted sketchy profiles of these early female terrorists in intelligence assessments for the White House, senior defense officials, and intelligence officers stationed overseas. But it was when I left the US government and traveled widely that I met with hundreds of people—both victims and perpetrators of violence—and came to understand that the whole language of terrorism has been corrupted by overuse. Their stories are laced throughout the book. I have learned to accept that each woman's story is unique and develops in a specific context, culture, and condition.

The more I listened, the more I observed the deeply personal arguments, incentives, and drivers for why some women choose violence or are coerced into violent extremism. I recognized that two people could speak of terrorism, and yet this concept might mean significantly different things for each person. So many people today don't know what terrorism is and engage in a battle of semantics instead of focusing on the root causes of violence or why terrorism begins, which is what I call *context*. As a former government analyst, I accepted the United States' oversimplified definition of terrorism as the use of violence by an individual or group to achieve a political goal. In truth, the politics of terrorists are connected to the religious language of the believer, who is committed to restoring an Islamic ideal throughout the world.

I learned that the intimate details of an extremist's life are the story of life and death. Recruits are told allegories of the forever and glorious Afterlife, a Paradise promised to the most honorable of women and men. It's the story told by the female propagandist proving the existence of God by exposing her own deep,

sad wounds; or by the women, wishing to be soothed by love, who join a savage war to rebel against real and perceived enemies. Lost in the stories of amoral actions intended by violent women is the unspeakable beauty of victims who live on in the memories of survivors.

What is the allure of extremism? In my lectures, I emphasize culture, context, and capability, what I call the Three Cs. In the world of counterterrorism, a neat arrangement of “root causes” allows authorities and experts to engage directly with the problem. The trouble is, this complex phenomenon needs to be properly identified and understood before intervention begins, because the solution to countering violent extremism, or CVE, is not always clean, clear, or uncomplicated.

Culture. Across time and conflicts, women who opt for or are selected for violence accept strongly held beliefs and religious rights. Every Muslim culture has its own norms and customs for its women. In some societies, men’s attitudes about women’s rights are extreme examples of control, creating a cultural chasm of gender rights. In various cultures, what women can and can’t do is often dictated by men. As this book reveals, male terrorist leaders who extolled female martyrs had specific gains (often, male extremists use women to advance their cause and ensure their own survival), which had nothing to do with granting women positions of power.

The same was true of Palestinian female operatives who strapped on the bomb before men encouraged women to die for the cause in Iraq: The earlier examples of Palestinian girls and women who detonated bombs in Israel proved that prevailing conservatives in the Middle East were willing to compromise their Islamic orthodoxy if the female bomber and supporters of violence advanced the vested interests of men. Chapter 3, “Deception,” on Iraq, exposes the culture of violence manipulated by men to invite women into suicide terrorism and explains why it worked until it didn’t.

In other Muslim cultures, a woman’s taking on the role of a man can be perceived as shameful to a man’s pride and ego. This partly explains why so few female bombers have surfaced in Afghanistan,

Pakistan, or the valley of Kashmir—none of these places have a history of female suicide terrorism, and the few attacks perpetrated by women are an exception, not the standard. When I was a senior instructor on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Regional Training Team, teaching the US military about Islam and the prevailing culture, I explained in a seminar on radical women why most men in this region do not choose women for violent attacks: men believe they are the sole guardians of women, preserving deeply traditional gender roles; men shield women from public life, defending local customs that divide men and women into specific spaces; and because men view their honor through their women, they guard them like their swords or ancient relics, which means that women are viewed by some men as property.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, where culture trumps religion, there are few cases of female terrorists. And there is no history of girls dying in Kashmir on a suicide mission. But there are numerous cases of women marrying would-be martyrs, women willing to be made widows for the terrorist group to which they belong. This book includes the story of an accidental meeting with a young woman who volunteered for a suicide mission because she believed this was the only way to call attention to the conflict in Kashmir.

Context. Like culture, contextual pressures help explain radical behavior. These pressures can be personal or political and are often labeled as “push and pull” factors for radicalization, which include gross human rights violations, widespread corruption, poorly governed areas, and the presence of protracted local conflicts.¹ Recently there have been several high-profile cases of young women from the West turning to terrorism online, a new phenomenon that Dr. Post calls the “virtual community of hatred.” Terrorism experts are asking: What do these girls want? Why is this happening? And how can we stop it? Several motives seem likely: to help other Muslims in need, an unequivocal love and desire for unconditional acceptance, a fixed identity that is true to Islam, a twisted Islamic feminism, and many more. Reports published by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue on the girls of ISIS provide some examples of women and girls who have traveled to Syria to find their fantastical forever male partner.

I have seen the sites where girls became instant BFFs (best friends forever) looking for love, family, meaning, identity, and maybe adventure. A girl using the moniker Umm Musa (or the “mother of Moses”) titled her Twitter page “Til Martyrdom Do Us Part,” with a picture of herself in all-black clothing with a red band across her forehead containing Arabic letters. She, like other girls, maintained her anonymity online, calling herself a *mujahidah* (“female fighter”). In the book *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, I contributed a chapter on the first female fighters in early Islam—the women who stood by their messenger in seventh-century Arabia.² These women had nothing in common with contemporary radicals disguised as fighters—some with weapons slung across their shoulders, others aspiring to be the “housewives of Raqqa” and mothers of future fighters for a mythical Caliphate.

Using the Internet, females are accessible and available to ISIS men. A French girl posing as Mélodie, a twenty-year-old woman, proved how easy it is to find radicals online. Within hours of creating her profile, she began chatting with a man named Bilel, who insisted on giving his cyber-sweetheart a new Islamic name. In her gripping memoir, *Undercover Jihadi Bride*, Anna Erelle wrote, “The identity change that Bilel demanded affected me. Day by day, he was psychologically killing Mélodie. She had to sacrifice everything for him; her life, her past, her mother, everybody she loved, and now this, the one thing that remained of her origins: her first name.”³

Mélodie was an impostor posing as a “jihadi bride”; Muslim girls who are connected to ISIS men online agree to and accept the new identity, the new name, the new place. Bilel declared to Mélodie, “My life, my wife, from now on, you will be called Umm Saladine. Welcome to the true Islam.” The same held true for hundreds of girls in the West, including teenagers in the American Southwest who almost made it to Syria because they wanted a new version of themselves. Girls wanting to shed their family, friends, and past can start a new life. These girls are committed believers, choosing a perverted Islam that contradicts the true practice of Islam. Their version of faith dilutes the principles of peace, love, and mercy preached by the Prophet of Islam and practiced by millions of Muslims today. This book includes the story of the Denver girls who

were lured by radical men on the Internet to go to Syria and were on their way there when they were found and returned to their families. Had they reached Syria, it's almost certain that these girls would never have been found.

Capability. The final C is related to competence. The story of the famed female shooter in San Bernardino in December 2015 proved that she had had training. When she gunned down fourteen people at a community center, it was clear that she knew how to fire a weapon; she knew whom to marry to enter the United States; and she understood the importance of hiding her identity and dark intentions. Tashfeen Malik had a plan, and leaving behind her six-month-old baby was part of the strategy. Maybe Malik knew she would be killed by authorities in a deadly shootout for the crime she was about to commit, and she was prepared to die. The husband-and-wife team is a relatively new form of terrorism and has been labeled lone-wolf attackers. I can only presume that Malik and her husband, Syed Farook, believed that they didn't need a team of killers. Two people were capable of committing mayhem, murder, and a massacre. More would just get in her way. After all, she proved herself capable, and that's all that mattered.

In truth, few experts have captured the suffering, sacrifice, or survival of women in conflict. By highlighting culture, context, and capability, I have tried to clearly explain why women become involved in terrorism. I know that the Three Cs is anything but an all-inclusive model, and it may appear limited by other macro-level root causes. Even as I write this, there is no absolute guide to the drivers of violent extremism. There are public studies and labyrinthine reports, and intelligence assessments I once used to write. Early on, I recognized that examining the unclassified world of Muslim women is the most effective way to understand the tangled world of radicals, both active and passive supporters of violence.

In her seminal and prize-winning book *Shoot the Women First* (1992), journalist Eileen MacDonald argued that women are more violent than men. Her stories rattled my belief in women's gifted ability to nurture and care for their family, commu-

nity, and country. When I discovered her work, the thought of a woman strapping on the suicide belt or supporting a terrorist group couched in Islamic rhetoric and imagery stunned me, as it did most law-abiding, peace-loving Muslims. I was unprepared for what I would find as a researcher-storyteller: that a Muslim woman could inflict harm on other Muslims and non-Muslims, that there was no easy way to identify femmes fatales and their supporters, and that violent women use Islamic text and symbolism to restore justice in an unjust war. The latter unnerved me for a long time because “violent *jihad*” is against the principles, values, and traditions of Islam.

No Muslim woman has the right to choose death over life. Muslims believe that death is not a destined choice. Only God determines our final hour. The Quran, Islam’s holy book, and multiple sayings of the Prophet forbid suicide. If religion is unambiguous on prohibitions against suicide—and, by extension, suicide terrorism—why do women choose to die? Why do women justify a sin so clearly forbidden by the Prophet of Islam? In a famous tradition, Muhammad said, “The gates of Heaven are forever closed to anyone who takes his [or her] own life.” Only God has the right to choose a person’s time of death.

In my professional life, I continued to search for Islam’s purpose and the “rightful” place of its women. Writing about women in Islam, and by extension, extremist women with a penchant for violence, opened up possibilities for greater understanding. I began to distinguish between the self-proclaimed “purist” and the betrayed believer trailing radical messages propagated by extremists. The violent visionaries came to me accidentally as their names were released in intelligence reporting, and later, in at-home or in-prison interviews. At the very least, women reveal their *intention* to conduct violence and/or join an extremist group, but few of them are accessible—they are in hiding and unreachable or unknown to the outside world—which makes it nearly impossible to discern the *beginning* of a woman’s entrance into radical Islam.

Therein lies the great danger and dilemma for terrorism analysts. Without access, scholars and security officers turn to second-hand sources, sketching fragmented life histories. Over the years,

I have entered the homes of countless Muslim women, violent and nonviolent, searching for a true picture of who or what may influence, inspire, and induce women to action. Instead of the tired stereotype of the female terrorist “behind the veil,” I have been looking for a more complete history, an expansive list of motives that can explain the behavior of women in, or deeply exposed to, conflict.

Like my contemporaries, I have resigned myself to the fact-as-observation that we will never know everything about female radicals. What I can do is provide thoughtful, never-before-told stories of women: some with massively defended psyches and cold, loveless smiles; others who are dissociated from what has happened to them in childhood or as young adults; the few with a world-weary attitude and an unreasoning desire to find Paradise that lingers long after; and women with the creative energy to remake the story of their life and change the status quo.

When I entered the private spaces of Muslim women, I discovered that some viewed violence as a weapon of choice. They believed in the radical interpretations of Islam. These women joined extremist groups to give purpose to their lives and effect change: to rewrite the future, to say *I am* within the boundaries set by men, to cleanse an unwanted past, to fall into favor with God, to cast away something broken or bruised or scraped, to push beyond the limits of their gender, to find a like-minded lover, or to experience the connection that a woman feels when she joins a sisterhood.

To be fair, this book is not everything you ever wanted to know about female terrorists or radical Islam. No book on this subject can be comprehensive for three reasons: First, the threat is evolving, and more women are joining (and recruiting other women) as I write this. Second, access to female terrorists is an ongoing challenge, which means the information we have on female radicals is sometimes cursory. For example, when a female extremist dies, we lose the ability to learn her intentions, motivations, and personal grievances. Instead, we piece together the lives of women, acting as a detective or an investigative journalist. When a female terrorist is captured, she is off-limits for national security reasons, except to a few journalists and terrorism analysts who are able to gain access and tell her story. Third, there is a growing body of literature

found in online lectures and videos on radical Islam posted by non-Muslims, who are engaged in an open tug-of-war against peaceful, practicing Muslims that is contaminating the water of truth.

While the book's primary focus is on extremist women, the majority of Muslim women are *not* violent, and they are equally important to this story. Most Muslim women in the West and the Islamic world practice Islam peacefully; some of these women are fighting radical Islam on their own terms. They have created organizations and led movements to support women, calling for greater gender equality and education. There are also silent advocates who are not interested in gaining global attention for attacking zealots imposing unorthodox Islamic practice. With patience, perseverance, and prudence, a community of nonviolent Muslim women are guarding and guiding their faith.

Despite their extremes, terrorists give women a voice. They encourage women of all ages, including teenagers, to do something more than go to school, go to the mosque, or stay at home. Groups like ISIS, also known as ISIL, promise women an idyllic life beyond the celestial orbits of comets and asteroids not yet seen. Extremist men empower women with violent *fatwas*, or edicts, that fall outside the legal restrictions of Sharia or Islamic law. Men give women new identities, starting with a name, and help them leave behind families. Men convince some women of their right to choose suicide missions that they call martyrdom; radical men rescue females from a paroxysm of despair and promise marriage forever—a partner in this life and a lover for the Afterlife. These men recruit women using political statements, allowing women to believe they have joined a global movement, a fantastical nationhood ideal presented as the solution to all problems. By answering the call to conflict, these women lean toward a fragmented Islamic law, siding with ignominious orthodoxy as the defense of the Muslim community, and therefore these women lose their religious privileges: the Prophet of Islam advanced the status of women, which radical men today violate when they manipulate female recruits. The women's ignorance of authentic faith results in a series of terrible mistakes and useless victories in senseless wars.

The story begins at home.