

Dressed to Kill

Why the number of female suicide bombers is rising in Iraq.

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Muslim female suicide bombers are on the rise. Even before women attackers claimed dozens of lives in Monday's coordinated attacks on Shiite pilgrims in Baghdad and political protesters in Kirkuk, women had carried out more than 20 missions in Iraq this year—the most violent one yet for the women of Al Qaeda. But for those of us who have studied the phenomenon, the assaults should not come as a surprise.

For almost 10 years, we have warned that women would start playing a more aggressive role in groups like Al Qaeda. As more men are captured or killed by security forces worldwide, it was inevitable that terror groups would consider other options to keep their cause alive. Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi, the Al Qaeda in Iraq leader notorious for his videotaped beheading of a foreign captive, may have been one of the first to recruit women, but his death in 2006 hardly brought the drive to an end. From 2003 to 2006, the rate of female suicide bombers in Iraq was relatively low—five attacks in three years. But in 2007, the increase was exponential. And by the end of this year, there will likely be 50 or more attacks conducted by women mujahidaat in Iraq.

Female fighters are hardly new; Muslim women have proved adept and astute warriors since the birth of Islam in seventh-century Arabia. That, however, fails to answer the question about why modern women—the givers of life—are willing to commit suicide for their cause. Many non-Muslims believe that men choose this course for religious reasons, in the hope that 72 virginal hours will greet them as martyrs in paradise. Women, however, do not choose suicide for reasons of faith or feminism. Too few Western scholars acknowledge that women conduct acts of violence to protect their men, country and future generations.

While much is unknown about suicidal mujahidaat, there is no doubt that many choose this course to avenge the loss of male family members—especially their sons. A simpler argument revolves around the word "protest." Women in Iraq today are either using violence to protest the loss of their society or the loss of their country to an occupation they don't believe in. Recall that the first two female bombers in March 2003, who detonated themselves days after U.S. forces entered Baghdad, declared on television that their primary motive was to protect Iraq from a foreign invader.

As more women choose suicide terrorism, the biggest challenge for U.S. Army officers is to find them before they blow themselves up. A U.S. Marine officer returning from Fallujah told me, "If we are told by our superiors not to look at a woman because Arab culture tells us not to, then how are we supposed to suspect them?" Because she is an invisible nonstate actor, the task of countering the threat is far more challenging than marginalizing Al Qaeda's men in Iraq. U.S. authorities recognize that the anonymity of the female bomber protects her personal identity, cloaks her affiliation with a terrorist group and makes it difficult for authorities to profile her. A senior Army official involved with intelligence operations in Diyala wrote to me in an e-mail, "We have never viewed females with the same lethality as we would a male. And because of that cultural sensitivity on our part, it has made the female a very valuable tool of the insurgent." No doubt, cultural mores and traditional, patriarchal norms that shield women from men play into the hands of insurgents. Seen as the honor of men in Arab society, women are able to assume an invisibility that makes it virtually impossible to know who the female suicide attacker is or will be.

If, as the U.S. military notes, women in the head-to-toe abaya are untouchable, then how can U.S. and Iraqi authorities predict and prevent future attacks? Recent efforts to employ Iraqi women to search other women at checkpoints—as was done in Baghdad this week—may be an

innovative tactic, but women willing to work for the U.S. government put their own lives and that of their families at great peril. Anyone on the U.S. payroll risks alienation from Iraqi society, and worse, death by Al Qaeda. Furthermore, hiring Iraqi women for search operations is a temporary solution to a larger question—the issue of occupation.

Those I have spoken to in Iraq express skepticism about the ability of the U.S. forces to address the new challenge of female bombers. Assuming American forces are inclined to take on this threat to the safety of the occupation forces and Iraqis alike, I offer the following suggestions. The Iraqi government, with U.S. support and resources, should offer a community-based approach that aims to improve the socioeconomic opportunities for women by providing them with basic necessities such as education for their children, protection for their personal safety and equal rights. This is no guarantee that female terrorism in Iraq will end, but if women get the right kind of help they are less likely to be open to recruitment. If conditions of Iraqi women fail to improve in the coming months, however, the bomber behind the veil will be nearly impossible to defeat.

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