



[Feature] terrorism

Photo: AP/Hatem Moussa

Palestinian women from the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades claim they are willing to be suicide bombers at a news conference in Jebaliya, northern Gaza Strip in May 2007.

DEATH AND THE MAIDENS

THE NUMBERS OF WOMEN CARRYING OUT SUICIDE BOMB ATTACKS IS ON THE INCREASE. WHY ARE THEY DYING TO KILL? KATRINA FOX REPORTS.

“When we heard about September 11 in America, we were all very happy in the Muslim world.” So says Saura, a member of Palestinian political party Hamas and a failed suicide bomber. She is one of four women interviewed in Pierre Rehov’s new film *Suicide Killers*. “I choose politics and to become a martyr because I prefer the afterlife near Allah,” Saura continues. “I don’t like life on earth. My only reward is Allah because I know I will go to Paradise.”

Her views are echoed by Kohira and Elham, also Hamas members who planned suicide bombings. “After the bombing in London we distributed candies, because they are the enemies of Islam,” says Kohira, while Elham adds, “Our final goal is to kill the enemies of Islam, all the enemies. Killing them all is a holy act.”

Suicide attacks are not a new phenomenon. As Debra D. Zedalis, a member of the US Army War College Class of 2004, points out, the strategy has been employed since as early as the 11th century. What is new is the increasing numbers of female suicide bombers. Their first known attack, according to Zedalis, came in 1985 when 16-year-old Khyadali Sana drove a truck into an Israeli Defence convoy and killed two soldiers. Since then female bombers have surfaced in several organisations including the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Chechen rebels, Al Aqsa Martyrs, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas.

So what kind of woman becomes a suicide bomber? The answer is there is no one single characteristic that can be attributed, except that, as with men, generally female suicide bombers are young. Some women are widows while others are unmarried, some have chil-

dren, some are pregnant, some are poor, others are university educated.

In her film, *Female Suicide Bombers*, for National Geographic Explorer, host Lisa Ling travelled to Chechnya, the Gaza Strip and West Bank of Israel to talk with the families of female suicide bombers. According to Ling, a number of these women had “very traumatic personal stories and issues”, such as Wafa Idris, the first female suicide bomber in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict who detonated a 22-pound bomb in the centre of Jerusalem outside a shoe store that killed her, an 81-year-old Israeli man and injured more than 100 others.

“She was married off at a very young age and could not have kids,” Ling says. “In that society a woman, a wife who can’t have kids is considered worthless ... Wafa’s mother said bluntly that if Wafa had been able to have kids, she probably wouldn’t have killed herself.”

The women interviewed by Ling were “vulnerable, broken women who saw no way out”.

Muhammad A. Wahid, president of the Islamic Association of Australia, says the reasons women become suicide bombers are due to several factors, mostly related to their environment and situation. “The motivation for such acts stem from a lack of justice or delay in justice, no hope for the future, a lack of genuine democracy, and prejudice,” he tells *CHERRIE*. “Imagine you are an Iraqi mother, already struggling to keep her family alive, living with the frustration of no clean, running water, severe shortage of food, no sewage system, no reliable electricity. Your children are growing up with no access to education, no future. At every frustrating moment, you think ‘Why is this happening to us? How can I give my children any future, any hope?’ In the middle of the night, your apartment comes under heavy

military attack. You and your family are woken at 3am and huddle in a corner terrified. The concrete wall shatters, everyone is screaming and you are desperately looking for all your children. Your 18-month-old daughter is dead.

“The funeral is swift, but where is the apology, where is the justice?” Wahid continues. “At your lowest moment, people are suggesting to take revenge. And for a moment, you agree and think, ‘Yes, why not, there is nothing else to live for. Someone must be punished for taking my innocent daughter’s life.’ Whenever people find themselves in these circumstances, they are extremely vulnerable and easily manipulated by misguided teachings.”

But there is no ‘holy war’ concept in Islam and it is prohibited to commit suicide, Wahid adds. “To resolve the issue of suicide bombing, we need to resolve the injustices and deliver equality and hope through dialogue and real actions – not war or fighting.”

There is no doubt that strapping a bomb to your body, entering a public place and blowing yourself and others up is a terrorist act and not one that should ever be condoned. But so is dropping bombs and killing hundreds of thousands of people in a war fought under the pretence of attaining democracy but which is really about oil and money. Acts of terror breed further acts of terror.

Unfortunately, the phenomenon of female suicide bombers is unlikely to go away anytime soon. Al Qaeda is reportedly recruiting women to the cause, and for some, such as Kohira, the end can’t come quickly enough. “Few are chosen by God and this is the way I would like to die,” she says. “I want to die as a martyr.”

Suicide Killers is distributed here through Eagle.

