



Volume 6, Number 3

February 09, 2012

The Right to Choose: The Women of *al-Qa'ida*

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Amidst the initial euphoria and confusion surrounding the Arab uprisings, a story broke on March 14, 2011, about a new *al-Qa'ida* publication, *Al-Shamikha* ("The Majestic One"). *Al-Shamikha* is a magazine published by the Al Fajr Media Center,¹ which targets would-be and veteran female supporters of *al-Qa'ida*. The cover of the first (and only) issue portrayed an AK-47 rifle poking out of a grassy hillside and two presumably female figures from the top of the head to the waist, clad in *niqabs*. The cover's main headline advertised the publication's feature item, "An interview with a Jihadi's wife," followed by other stories including "Pages from a Mujahida's (female jihadi) Notebook," and "Treatment Tips for a Clear Complexion."²

At the time of its online appearance, analysts interpreted *Al-Shamikha*'s debut as an indication of the growing encouragement of women's participation in the splintered, yet active *al-Qa'ida* organization. The liberal Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy attributed this to the shrinking pool of individuals from which *al-Qa'ida* recruits its members. In her articles on the subject, she argued that the true role models for millions of Middle Eastern young women and men were those who were participating in the 2011 Arab uprisings, like Tawakul Karaman, a Yemeni female activist who received the Nobel Peace

¹ According to the findings of the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security, the Al Fajr Media Center was established in 2006 and serves as an internet clearinghouse for several violent groups throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and elsewhere. "Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat," United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, Minority and Majority Staff Report, May 8, 2008, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ada482218>.

² *Al-Shamikha Magazine*, <http://www.archive.org/stream/AlshamikhaMagazine/AlshamikhaM#page/n0/mode/2up>.

Prize in October 2011.³ For Eltahawy, *Al-Shamikh*a was proof of *al-Qa'ida's* increasing struggle for relevancy. In that same vein, political scientist Mia Bloom contends that *al-Qa'ida* has resorted to recruiting female operatives due to the decrease in funding and the number of foreign fighters in its ranks, as well as the change in attitudes among social groups that previously embraced them.⁴ Even if they are correct, however, it should be noted that women's participation in *al-Qa'ida* is not new, and has been on the rise since 2003. Even more striking is the fact that the small but noticeable increase in women's participation has apparently been at the initiative of women themselves.

Generally, women have primarily played a behind-the-scenes role in *al-Qa'ida*. They manage the financial affairs of the organization, indoctrinate future jihadis (sons and other male relatives) through education and support in the home environment, and use the Internet to cast a wider net to attract potential volunteers.⁵ Nevertheless, in March 2003 *al-Qa'ida* reported the establishment of its first women's suicide unit, led by a woman called Umm Osama.⁶ Then, in August 2004, an online periodical called *al-Khansa'a* was published by the Women's Information Bureau of *al-Qa'ida*, purportedly based in the Arabian Peninsula.⁷ The first issue had a hot pink cover with gold embossed lettering spelling out the feature article, "Biography of the Female Mujahideen."⁸ The publication was named after a famous female poet and contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad who converted to Islam, and whose legacy was the willingness to sacrifice her husband and sons to jihad.⁹ Accordingly, the magazine not only encouraged women to bring up their children to be jihadis, but also enjoined them to become martyrs themselves.¹⁰ But the early message of *al-Khansa'a*, whose publication was short-lived, did not necessarily translate into an organization-wide directive for women to assume a leading role in the organization's operations, especially not in suicide attacks. Rather, *al-Qa'ida* women's transition from providing only background support to also fighting in the frontline was piecemeal and, much like the organization itself, fragmented.

In September 2005, *al-Qa'ida's* first female suicide bomber successfully executed her mission in Iraq. Dressed as a man, an anonymous woman walked into a group of military recruits in the town of Tall Afar near the Iraqi-Syrian border and took her own life, those of five men, and wounded dozens of

³ Mona Eltahawy, "Revolutionary Woman vs. Burqa Woman," *TheStar.com*, March 17, 2011, <http://www.thestar.com/business/article/955088--revolutionary-woman-vs-burqa-womanR>.

⁴ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, (London: Hurst and Company, 2011), p. 215.

⁵ Katharina Von Knop, "The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30:5, 2007, pp. 410-11.

⁶ Von Kopp, "The Female Jihad," p. 404.

⁷ Von Kopp, "The Female Jihad," p. 406.

⁸ Lauren Frayer, Pakinam Amer, Daa Hadid, Zeina Karam, "Women Fight for Right to Join Al Qaeda," *Associated Press*, featured on *CBS News Online*, June 2, 2008, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/05/31/world/main4142514.shtml>.

⁹ Marilyn Booth, "Woman in Islam: Men and the 'Women's Press' in Turn-of-the-20th-Century Egypt," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 33 (2001), p. 187.

¹⁰ Von Kopp, "The Female Jihad," p. 407.

bystanders.¹¹ The woman's organizational affiliation was traced to Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born terrorist who founded the Iraqi branch of *al-Qa'ida* (AQI) in 2004. On November 9, 2005, Muriel Degauque became the first European Muslim convert to carry out a suicide attack on an American military patrol in the Iraqi town of Babuqa; she and her husband were also involved with Zarqawi and AQI. Following these initial attacks, the number of women suicide bombers increased; in 2007 there were eight and, by May 2008, 18 women in Iraq had already taken their lives.¹² As of 2011, women accounted for almost one-third of the suicide bombings in Iraq and as many as 60 percent in Diyala Province; and suicide bombings by women against Shi'a Muslim civilians have become a trademark of AQI attacks.¹³

Until recently, though, suicide bombings remained taboo for *al-Qa'ida* women who followed the leadership of senior *al-Qa'ida* leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. In April 2008, the SITE Monitoring Service discovered a two-hour audio recording session posted on an Islamic militant website in which al-Zawahiri insisted that women's role in the organization is limited to caring for *al-Qa'ida* fighters. (The recording was disseminated after an inundation of queries submitted by women *al-Qa'ida* supporters on the topic of women carrying out suicide attacks.) This designation was also supported by *fatwas* and recordings of Osama bin Ladin that outlined the importance of women in their functions as supporters, facilitators and promoters in carrying out jihad.¹⁴ According to Rita Katz, co-founder and director of SITE, this position may have been influenced by the Taliban, a major supporter of *al-Qa'ida*, that rejected the notion of a military role for women in jihad. Yet, the response to al-Zawahiri's edict "prompted an emotional gender debate and an outcry from women," who were fighting "for the right to be terrorists."¹⁵ Of course, the dialogue took place online, where these women had the freedom to vent their frustration and disappointment under the protective anonymity of screen names and password-protected chat rooms. In fact websites have become *the* place where jihadi women can be most active in encouraging men to become jihadis, motivating women to support them, and propagating a personal platform for Islamic resistance.¹⁶

However, in January 2010, less than two years after al-Zawahiri insisted that *al-Qa'ida* women play a supporting role, his wife, Umaymah Hasan Ahmad Muhammad Hasan, disseminated a message that reflected an ideological shift in this branch of *al-Qa'ida*. Umaymah Hasan reiterated the service-oriented role of *mujahidat*, but also added that women should fulfill whatever is asked of them in the global jihad, including participation in fighting or martyrdom

¹¹ Christopher Dickey, "Women of Al Qaeda," The Daily Beast, December 11, 2005, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2005/12/11/women-of-al-qae...>

¹² Elaine Sciolino and Souad Mekhennet, "Al Qaeda Warrior Uses Internet to Rally Women," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/28/world/europe/28terror.html?p...>

¹³ Bloom, *Bombshell*, pp. 213-4.

¹⁴ von Knop, "The Female Jihad," pp. 404-5

¹⁵ "Al Qaida's stance on women sparks debate," *Gulf News*, June 1, 2008, <http://gulfnews.com/news/region/palestinian-territories/al-qaida-s-st...>

¹⁶ Bloom, *Bombshell*, p. 204.

operations. Throughout the statement she lauded the many women martyrs and enjoined "Allah to allow her and other Muslim women to follow them."¹⁷

Reports of the Taliban and *al-Qa'ida* having established female suicide bombing cells in remote areas of northwestern Pakistan and northeastern Afghanistan appeared that year and, on June 21, 2010, two U.S. soldiers were killed in the first female suicide attack in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan. Qari Zia Rahman, a Taliban and *al-Qa'ida* commander, claimed credit for this attack. The second Taliban/*al-Qa'ida* female suicide attack occurred on December 24, 2010, in the Baujaur Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan.¹⁸ Also in 2010, a new women's jihad e-magazine, *Hadifat Al Khansa'a* ("Granddaughters of Al-Khansa'a"), was published by the previously unknown organization *Al Sumud*.¹⁹

In mid-2010, another *al-Qa'ida* precedent was set when members of the organization in Yemen and Saudi Arabia widely publicized their dismay at the arrest of Haylah al-Qassir, also known as "Um al-Rabab"²⁰ and the "first lady of Al-Qa'ida."²¹ Before being apprehended by Saudi authorities, Haylah al-Qassir had served as a successful recruiter and fundraiser for *al-Qa'ida*. Based in Saudi Arabia, she closely coordinated her efforts with Wafa' Al-Shehri, another ranking female member of *al-Qa'ida* in Yemen and the wife of Sa'id Al-Shehri, a former Guantanamo detainee and currently deputy leader of *al-Qa'ida* in the Arabian Peninsula.²² *Al-Qa'ida*'s very public call for retaliation against al-Qassir's incarceration marked an important shift. In the past, it was considered taboo to make a spectacle of a female operative, as it violated the customary practice of keeping women out of the public eye. In Saudi Arabia, this event sparked a discussion about the inherent contradiction of a hard-line extremist organization that has rapidly evolved to accept women as members, commanders and inspirational leaders, in a country where females aren't allowed to drive.²³

Certainly, the tumultuous chain of events set into motion by the Arab uprisings of 2011 has put the century-old "woman question" back into the spotlight across the Middle East. In the prevailing discourse on women, the assumption is that women will impact the region in a fashion commensurate with Western liberal values. After all, statistics compiled by USAID, in 2011,

¹⁷ "As-Shamikha Magazine: Inside Al Qaeda's Women of Jihad," Anti-Defamation League, March 18, 2011, http://www.adl.org/main_Terrorism/as_shamikha.htm.

¹⁸ Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda, Taliban create female suicide cells in Pakistan and Afghanistan," *The Long War Journal*, December 31, 2010, http://www.longjournal.org/archives/2010/12/al_qaeda_taliban_create_female_suicides_cell_in_pakistan_and_afghanistan.php.

¹⁹ Neil Ungerleider, "Close Reading Al Qaeda's Latest Jihadist Women's eMagazine (Yes, Latest)," *Fast Company*, March 15, 2011, <http://www.fastcompany.com/1738605/al-qaedas-newest-epublication-a-jihadist-womans-magazine>.

²⁰ Mshari Al-Zaydi, "'Al Qaeda's Women' in Saudi Arabia," *Asharq Alawsat*, June 6, 2010, <http://www.asharq-e.com/print.asp?artid=id21208...>

²¹ Lara Setrakian, "'First Lady of Al Qaeda' Arrested by Saudi Authorities," *ABC News*, July 1, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/lady-al-qaeda-shift-jihadi-women/sto...>

²² Lara Setrakian, "'First Lady of Al Qaeda'"

²³ Abdul Rahman Al-Rashid, "From Driving Cars to Leading Al Qaeda," *Asharq Alawsat*, June 8, 2010, <http://www.asharq-e.com/print.asp?artid=id21228...>

indicate that women who receive an education for seven or more years marry later and have fewer children; that a country's GDP increases by an average of three percent when women stay in school; and that countries where the proportion of women in legislative bodies is 30 percent or higher are more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic.²⁴

However, as the small but nonetheless noteworthy phenomenon of "*Al-Qa'ida Women*" demonstrates, women's choices may not always reflect the priorities and interests of international organizations seeking to promote democratization and liberalization in the Middle East.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

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²⁴ "Why Invest in Women?," USAID, <http://50.usaid.gov/infographic-why-invest-in-women/usa-id-women/?size=infographicMedium>, 2011.