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Daughters of Iraq: front-line guards against suicide bombers

Iraqi women take on key security role as attacks by female suicide bombers rise.

By [Tom A. Peter](#) | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*
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Baghdad - Although the overall level of violence in Iraq has decreased to a four-year low, the country has recently witnessed a sharp rise in a violent trend that alarms many Iraqis: female suicide bombings. This year the number of suicide bombings carried out by women has more than tripled to 29 attacks, say US military officials.

Al Qaeda and other insurgent groups have turned to women to exploit cultural practices that do not allow men to search women. As a result, females can pass through most checkpoints in Iraq without someone so much as looking in their handbags.

To combat this threat, Iraqis have begun recruiting women for the Daughters of Iraq, a female counterpart to the Sons of Iraq community policing program largely credited with reducing violence in Iraq. While female security guards remain a small minority, they've stopped many female insurgents. And, some say their example could help change perceptions about the role of women in Iraq.

"Right now women [suicide bombers] are more dangerous than men," says Sheikh Zaid Ahmed Al-Wan, an Awakening Council leader in Adhamiya, a Baghdad neighborhood. "You can't see anything on a woman's body, especially when she's wearing an abaya [a traditional Islamic gown] or a long dress. In the summer you can see everything on a man, you can even see if there's something in his pocket and even in the winter you can tell if he's carrying a big weapon or a bomb."

The most recent female suicide attack killed 18 people and injured 75 on Aug. 14. The bomber targeted Shiite pilgrims in a rest area in Iskandariyah in Iraq's Babil Province.

The bombing highlights how females can often inflict more damage than males. The majority of women



bombers wear explosive vests or belts covered by abayas and are sometimes made to look pregnant, according to US military officials who track suicide bombing trends. This allows women easy access to crowded areas where they can cause the most damage.

Identifying a common profile for female bombers can be difficult, with one as young as 13. There is also speculation that bombing cells have used mentally handicapped women to carry out some attacks.

While the motives of each bomber varies, US military officials say most female suicide bombers share at least one of the following characteristics or circumstances: dishonor through sexual indiscretion, loss of a family member and a desire for revenge, desire to attain heroic status, inability to produce children, or an interest in demonstrating gender equality.

To reverse the new trend, community leaders began calling for women to join the Daughters of Iraq about a year ago. Though females in the group number in the hundreds, they remain a small fraction of the 103,000-strong Sons of Iraq community policing organization.

Generally, the women guard strategic locations, such as bridges, government buildings, or schools. Unlike their male counterparts, they do not carry weapons. Instead, they are stationed at checkpoints with armed males. They also do not search or interact with men, only women.

In Adhamiya, Sheikh Zaid says the Daughters of Iraq have found women carrying everything from intelligence for insurgents to stolen gold and medicine.

Despite the rise in women bombers, many Iraqi women were initially resistant to being searched, even by other women.

"When we started our work, other females said, 'How can you work a job like this?' They did not accept us working as Sahwa (Arabic for 'Awakening')," says Fatima Khadhem, a Daughters of Iraq member in Adhamiya. "But we insisted on doing our jobs and now the same ladies have accepted us."

Like the female suicide bombers, some of the women drawn to the Daughters of Iraq are motivated by wrongs done to family members. After insurgents killed her husband, Liqae Gazhi Mohamed joined the Daughters to help make her community safer.

"The Sahwa has given life back to Adhamiya," says Mrs. Mohamed, who supports five children with her work as a security guard. "I feel like I'm more independent and stronger than before."

Involving women in security roles also challenges traditional gender roles. While Iraqi women have never faced restrictions like those imposed on females in countries like Saudi Arabia, in many circles women in the workforce carried a stigma.

Although Malath Fahmi's mother wanted to work when her family fell on hard times under Saddam Hussein's regime, her father forbade it. A generation later, facing economic hardships, this time due to the insurgency, Ms. Fahmi joined the Sahwa to support her family.


"In my mother's time, if a woman had a degree she could work, but many people did not support the idea," says Fahmi, who hopes to continue working. "I don't want to be dependent on my brother, or my father, or my husband," she says.

Still, attitudes toward women's roles are slow to change, says Kawakib Salih, a professor of sociology at Baghdad University.

"Men still see female security guards as not having a feminine side, so men will not want to marry a woman who has worked as a Sahwa," says Dr. Salih. "In the future, maybe men will not support this job. It was created as a temporary solution to address the security situation and perhaps in the future it will disappear."

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