

The Deadly Sex.

Women are the latest weapon of Iraq's terrorist groups. The tragic tale of one suicide bomber.



An Iraqi woman at a checkpoint. Rarely frisked, women make effective bombers.

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Female Suicide Bombers: The Latest Weapon

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By Bobby Ghosh/Baghdad

No one remembers Hasna Maryi ever opening her family's Koran. She rarely attended her village mosque, and she told others she regarded the imam, who once made a pass at her, as a lecherous scoundrel. It was not religious extremism that made this villager from Anbar province blow herself up at an Iraqi-police checkpoint last summer, killing three officers and injuring at least 10 civilians.

Religion may not have been her motive, but Hasna was an early, willing casualty of the latest jihadi trend: the use of women on the front lines of the holy war. American and Iraqi officials say jihadi groups are deploying female bombers far more frequently to slip past the heavy security cordons that are the backbone of the U.S. military's surge strategy. There have been 21 female suicide attacks so far this year, up from just eight in all of 2007. As sectarian violence has plummeted and a semblance of normality has returned to Iraq, the use of women bombers reflects the jihadis' desperation as much as their lethal determination. On June 22, a female bomber killed 15 people and wounded 45 in Baqubah, 35 miles (56 km) northeast of Baghdad.

Women have long been enlisted as suicide bombers by Sri Lankan and Palestinian terrorist groups. But they are uniquely effective in Iraq. In each attack, female bombers have been able to get to their intended target despite multiple layers of security. In a culture that forbids male police officers and checkpoint guards to frisk women--yet also frowns on women joining the security forces--many have easy passage to high-value targets like police stations and markets. They can go unchecked where no man would dream of passing.

So why do they do it? Suicide bombers may end their lives in the same way, but it would be foolish to draw any conclusions about their motivations from a single story. Still, how Hasna came to blow herself up sheds some light on the cycle of hopelessness some Iraqi women, worn down by so many years of tyranny and war, find themselves in.

TIME learned of Hasna from her sister Sadiya and their mother Shafiqah, who now live in hiding in Syria. (The names of the bomber and her family have been changed at the family's insistence.) Although aspects of their story are impossible to verify, important details tally with the version of events provided by Iraqi officials in Anbar and by the U.S. military. Sadiya and Shafiqah also allowed TIME to view but not record two video CDs given them by an al-Qaeda fighter. One is Hasna's last statement; the other is a recording of her suicide mission. The picture that emerges is of a once strong woman driven mad with sorrow after the death of her brother Thamer, who in the fall of 2003 joined an insurgent group linked to al-Qaeda. Hasna, who doted on her brother, had pushed him to become a leader in the group. Thamer volunteered for his own suicide mission in early 2007. On a February morning, he was being driven to the Kilometer 5 security checkpoint by fellow jihadis when one of their belts exploded prematurely, killing everyone in the car.

Hasna was distraught--not because her brother was dead but because he had not completed his mission. "She had been ready to hear about his death," says Sadiya. "But the idea that he would not be a martyr was too much for her to bear." Hasna locked herself indoors for a week, until the neighbors called Sadiya, certain her sister was dead. They broke down the door and found her comatose and surrounded by feces. Under Sadiya's care, she regained some of her health, but she continued to be haunted by the shame of Thamer's failure: she referred to it as his "incomplete martyrdom." It wasn't long before she concluded that the only way to redeem her brother was to complete his mission.

Soon after, Hasna approached her brother's former colleagues with a proposal. If they could get her a belt, she would bomb Kilometer 5 herself. The group was initially skeptical: it had never worked with a woman and felt certain she would lose her nerve at the last moment. But Hasna wore down the group with her insistence, and it sent her to Syria to be vetted by senior jihadi commanders and fitted for a bomb belt.

The next time Sadiya saw her sister, Hasna was almost giddy with anticipation. She told funny stories about her experiences in Syria. The jihadis' religious beliefs forbade them to touch her, so, she said, they had no idea how to measure her for the belt. She offered to give them her brassiere, but they had to first check with an imam whether Islam allowed a man to touch a woman's underclothes. (Sadiya says she never tried to talk Hasna out of her plan: "She was not the type of person whose mind you could change.")

On the morning Hasna blew herself up last July, there were 40 policemen and no women on duty at the checkpoint. At 9:30 a.m., a light-colored Opel drove to within 100 yards of

the checkpoint, dropped off a female passenger and turned back toward Ramadi. The woman wore a billowing black gown known as an abaya, and her face was veiled. As she drew close to the blast walls of the checkpoint, she seemed to trip over her abaya and fall. According to eyewitnesses, the woman called out to the nearest policemen, "Come and help me up. I'm hurt." When two policemen approached, she reached into her tunic and pulled the trigger on her bomb belt, instantly killing the two cops and fatally injuring a third. A huge fireball slammed into a car parked at the checkpoint, and the five civilians inside were badly burned.

A week after Hasna's death, Sadiya received two video CDS. She says she can scarcely recognize the woman in the recordings. "It is Hasna but without Thamer," she says. "When he died, she became half of herself, and you can see half a person on the video." It is common for suicide bombers to videotape a wasiya, or will; many are posted on jihadi websites. In the recordings, the bombers, usually masked, are shown praying from the Koran, extolling the virtues of martyrdom and damning their enemies (typically the U.S.) to hell.

On Hasna's wasiya, her face is uncovered; her long dark hair is loose. She stares straight at the camera and speaks in a low, unchanging voice. Although she doesn't seem to be consulting any notes, she never pauses to collect her thoughts. The 15-min. monologue is entirely about her little brother--about how he was an obedient child who loved his family and would do anything for their happiness. Hasna relates anecdotes about Thamer's precociousness in school, his skill at drawing, his talent for fixing household electronics. There's not a single religious or political utterance in the entire monologue, which may explain why it has not been posted on the usual jihadi websites. There's only one passing reference to the U.S. presence in Iraq. "When the Americans first came to the village," Hasna says, "my brother made a sketch of their Hummers and gave it to their commander. He was very impressed by how quickly Thamer was able to make such an accurate drawing."

Hasna ends with a simple declaration: "Now I am going to join him in paradise."

Although Hasna may have realized her wish for martyrdom, the legacy of her murderous deed haunts her family. A friend told Sadiya that the families of the policemen killed at Kilometer 5 have sworn to kill her if she returns to Iraq. "Our lives are finished," she says. "Thamer and Hasna ... they are lucky that they are dead. I am the unlucky one to keep living."

With reporting by Charles Crain/Baghdad

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