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Dying for respect

Palestinian women are promised equality in death. It's a cynical manipulation of their powerlessness in society.

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BY BARBARA VICTOR

Until she blew herself up in Haifa, Israel, a couple of weeks ago, Hanadi Jaradat was one of the lucky ones. A lawyer who had studied in Jordan, she was about to open offices in Jenin. What makes this suicide bombing so terrifying is not that Jaradat was a woman, but that she was proof that the culture of death permeating Palestinian society is not limited to the poor or desperate. Jaradat had enjoyed a life of promise. She was in a position to help others and, against all odds, succeed.

But when Jaradat returned from Jordan to Jenin, in the West Bank, she found herself living in an atmosphere of militant Islam that viewed women as second-class citizens. The turning point in her life happened last May, when she witnessed her brother and cousin shot dead by undercover Israeli security agents. Immediately after the incident, Jaradat, distraught and grieving, went to live with Yasser Obeidi, the military commander of the Islamic Jihad in Jenin.

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For the next two months -- according to family members and Israeli security forces who interviewed Jaradat's friends and family -- Obeidi, 29 and the married father of two, seduced, recruited and trained Jaradat until she was ready for her mission. He became her lover, mentor and one-way ticket to Paradise, where he promised that they would find eternal happiness together as man and wife. She was to go first, and he would follow.

Jaradat's voyage to eternity ended on the afternoon before Yom Kippur, when she detonated 10 kilos of dynamite hidden in a knapsack. As of now, Obeidi has not joined Jaradat in Paradise. He is currently on the run and wanted by Israeli authorities.

Women suicide bombers represent a unique dilemma for anyone who generally recoils from the notion of young Palestinians strapping on explosive belts and killing Israelis along with themselves. If the highest honor that one can achieve in Palestinian society is to die a martyr's death, is it fair to condemn those who include women in this dubious privilege?

The average Palestinian might be surprised to learn that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's decision to support suicide attacks was made at a time a few years ago when his political adversaries, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, were gaining popularity in the streets and threatening his leadership.

What Arafat needed was a weapon that would impress his Islamic opponents and terrorize his Israeli enemy. To shore up his floundering political control, Arafat shifted the emphasis of his military operation onto a very special kind of suicide bomber -- one that, until then, was forbidden in the Quran.

On the morning of Jan. 27, 2002, Arafat organized a rally for women in his compound in Ramallah. Arafat's usual rhetoric and zeal notwithstanding, what made this particular speech different was his proclamation that women were equal to men -- at least in the struggle against Israel.

Over and over he repeated the phrase, "Shahida (the feminine for martyr) all the way to Jerusalem!" In response, the women chanted, "We give our blood for you, Abu Amar" (Arafat's nom de guerre).

That very afternoon, Wafa Idris, a 26-year-old Palestinian woman, blew herself up in Jerusalem. Since then, there have been five other women who have killed themselves in the name of the Palestinian cause.

Tragically, the terrible success of the suicide bomber marked a new dark phase for

Palestinian women. The moment when an apparently normal young woman turns herself into a human bomb is unimaginable. Yet there are similarities among the six Palestinian women who have made the transition from bearer of life to killing machine. Most of them were marginalized in a society where there are no second chances for women who err according to social, cultural and religious rules set down by their leaders.

Wafa Idris had been abandoned by her husband because she was sterile; Darine Abu Aisha, the second bomber, had been forced into an arranged marriage; Ayat al Akras, the third, was recruited to die to exonerate her father from accusations that he collaborated with the enemy; Hiba Daraghmeh, the fifth bomber, had been raped. And Andaleib Takatka, impressionable and star struck, simply longed to be a hero like the others.

In the course of writing a book and filming a documentary on Palestinian women suicide bombers, I spoke to many other women who tried and failed in suicide bomb attempts. All had similar stories and had all been recruited by men (lovers or male family members) who promised them that second chance, but only if they strapped on an explosive belt and killed by dying.

The fatal cocktail for male suicide bombers -- religious doctrine that promises the bomber eternal life, nationalistic fervor, hardships of living under an occupying force, and economic deprivation -- is only part of the formula when it comes to their female counterparts. For women throughout the Occupied Territories, victimization in every aspect of daily life -- religion, politics and the social structures of their own families and communities -- is the final ingredient in that fatal cocktail.

It is painful enough to be abandoned by a husband, or to fall in love with a married man, or to raise a child alone in dire financial straits, or to be deprived of an education, or to be forced to marry one man when you love another.

But when every life opportunity or problem is greeted by a series of closed doors, when there are no friends or family to offer emotional support, no professional fulfillment that contributes to a sense of pride, no structures within society to help you cope, and above all no assurance that there are second and third chances to begin again, it becomes less mysterious why some of the more vulnerable could be convinced to end their lives.

And, unmarried Palestinian women, more than any other group, live under the most stringent set of religious rules.

It is notable that on the same day that Darine Abu Aisha, the second female suicide bomber, blew herself up at a checkpoint near Jerusalem, Sheik Ahmed Yassine, the spiritual head of Hamas, issued a fatwa giving women permission to participate in suicide bombings. Suddenly, religious leaders were able to quote the Quran as justification for forbidding women to realize their intellectual and emotional goals, and they could re-interpret the Quran to encourage them to die horrific deaths.

Suicide bombings give voice to the desperate, and desperation is indeed rampant throughout the West Bank and Gaza. It is not only the desperation of men who are humiliated at checkpoints or ashamed because they can't support their families, it is also the desperation of women who believe that equality is possible when they are recruited and trained by their male handlers and, of course, when they reach Paradise and are, as Dr. Abdul Rantisi, the spokesman for Hamas, says, "finally, their own master."

Equally egregious is that Palestinian mothers are forced, out of fear, to exhibit pride instead of anguish when they learn their children have turned themselves into human bombs. In a society where rules, trends and edicts are not negotiable, words or feelings that contradict the "party line" are not tolerated.

By promoting a glory-filled journey from earth to Paradise, politically motivated

Palestinian leaders misuse and misdirect the despair of their people against the prospect for peace. Suicide bombings indeed give voice to the desperate. But with no one to encourage and validate their accomplishments and ambition, desperate Palestinian women are doomed to be exploited to a cynical and lethal extreme.

The only road map Arafat has ever supported is one that leads his people -- jobless or employed, religious or secular, educated or illiterate and now, male or female -- into the clutches of those determined to sacrifice them for the Palestinian cause. Not only does Arafat continue to mislead the world with words that befit a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, he dupes his own people into believing that dying in the name of religion or nationalistic fervor will further their cause.

Worse still is his political cynicism when he promises Palestinian women equality and respect, but only if they die in an act of martyrdom. That wasn't the deal. Palestinian women trusted Arafat because he offered them a better life. The world trusted him to make the transition from terrorist to statesmen. Clearly, that was a grave mistake.

Barbara Victor is the author of the just-published "Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers" (Rodale).