'The first objective, sensitive and honest look at what motivates women (and men) to die for a political cause. Parts are shocking, parts make you weep, but throughout, well written with brilliant analysis.'
Madame Figaro

ARMY OF ROSES

INSIDE THE WORLD OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN SUICIDE BOMBERS

BARBARA VICTOR

This is an excerpt from Barbara Victor's Novel, "***Army of Roses***", and is Copyright (c) 2003-2013 Barbara Victor. All Rights Reserved.

This excerpt is intended for review by prospective readers of the full book, and has only been authorized to be placed on www.barbaravictor.com

FOREWORD

AT THE VERY BEGINNING of the first Intifada in 1987, when the shock troops of Palestinian resistance in the West Bank and Gaza were still children with stones, and neither the Israeli intelligence services nor exiled Palestinian groups knew quite what to make of these kids, I went to Baghdad to visit Yasser Arafat. The grizzled leader of the Palestinians' "armed struggle" for the previous twenty years was comfortable and secure there, thanks to Saddam Hussein's generous patronage, and when I arrived to meet him he was relaxing with aides in the living room of a luxurious government guest house. Arafat didn't look up to see who'd come into the room. His eyes were fixed on a TV, which showed news footage of the uprising in far-away Gaza. "Look, look!" shouted Arafat suddenly, drawing everyone's attention to the screen. "Look! They're girls!" He just couldn't believe that

little Palestinian schoolgirls, just like little Palestinian schoolboys, were taking to the barricades and hurling rocks at the Israeli troops. Few of his men had ever been so brave.

Later, when Palestinian groups like Arafat's Fatah and the Islamic movement Hamas managed to gain control over the insurrection and to organize the violence, little girls were excluded from the front lines. Yet, as Barbara Victor makes clear in this extraordinary chronicle of passion and politics, terror and liberation, Palestinian women have always known that when it comes to suffering and dying, they are the equals of their men. And in the last few years, as they have slung backpacks full of explosives over their shoulders or strapped bombs around their waists—indeed, around their wombs—some have chosen, too, to be killers.

Victor begins this book asking how it can be that women, who are bearers of life, are turned into killing machines. By following that elemental theme she takes us deeper into the minds of suicide bombers, and the world that creates them, than most of us have ever been or imagined we could be. I've known Barbara Victor for years, and I can't think of anyone who could bring more empathy to these tragic stories of terror and loss. Like many of us, journalists who've worked both sides of the conflict, she tries to understand, even to feel, the anger and the grief in order to explain the atrocities and the retributions. And, like the novelist she is, she also searches for human truths even in the most inhumane actions.

Yes, the reasons behind the act of each of these women are social, and religious, and political. But that clearly is not enough to make them make this extraordinary and horrible sacrifice. A

suicide bombing is not merely an act of protest, or even of combat. Probably more than any other fighter in any other kind of war, the suicide bomber carrying out an act of terror makes an intensely personal and direct decision. The would-be martyr stands before her victims: soldiers, sometimes, or perhaps other women just shopping for dinner, or maybe a girl very much like herself. And she pushes the button, or does not. She and she alone decides.

By interviewing the mothers and friends of the bombers, their brothers and ex-husbands, their recruiters and "handlers," and some of the girls who have held the button in their hand and refused, in the end, to die or to kill, Victor gives us an extraordinarily intimate sense of their motives. Even as her narrative follows them on the way to their deaths, she tells the stories, as we have never had them before, of their lives.

These are not the first women to embrace terror; not even the first Palestinians. (On the same visit to Baghdad in 1987, Arafat proudly introduced me to a beautiful Palestinian protégée who had lost several fingers on one hand while making a bomb.) And these are not the first women to immolate themselves along with their victims. In Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers have trained brigades of young girls ready to kill by dying, including the woman who, bearing flowers and a bomb, assassinated former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1992.

As far back as 1985, Syrian intelligence encouraged and coerced young Lebanese women to blow themselves up in attacks on Israeli troops and the Israel-backed militias of South Lebanon. One, dubbed "the Bride of the South," won such posthumous fame as a symbol of resistance that posters of her were seen even in the back

alleys of East Jerusalem. But the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza in 1985 were one of the most docile occupied populations in history. They seemed a long way from adopting the bloody and terrifying tactics that had become so common in Lebanon as a response to Israel's invasion three years before.

Victor gives us the history we need to understand how those passive, occupied people in the Palestinian territories could move to popular revolt, and through the tragedy of a failed peace, to the ferocious anger of suicidal bombing campaigns. But she does not claim that history alone can explain what has happened to create this "army of roses," as Arafat called his female followers.

In one of the most striking passages of the book, Victor alludes to the stories she heard from the families of the dead and directly from the mouths of women who tried and failed to become *shahidas*, or martyrs: "It is painful enough in life to be left by a husband; or to find yourself the focus of ridicule and disdain because you fell in love with more than one man; or to be considered damaged because you can't have a child; or to be forced to bear the full responsibility for raising a child as a single mother; or because you crave an education unavailable to you; or to feel the crushing responsibility of saving a beloved male relative from humiliation or death. But when every life opportunity ends with a closed door, when there are no friends who will offer emotional support, no professional fulfillment that could contribute to a sense of pride and independence, and no structure in place within the society to help cope, economically or emotionally, with fatherless children, then it becomes a little less mysterious that some of these vulnerable women could be convinced to end their lives."

But Victor reveals, too, the role of the men who do whatever needs doing to make the suicide happen. They handle the young women quite differently than they do the young men. As one of the many psychologists interviewed by Victor explains, "When an adolescent boy is humiliated at an Israeli checkpoint, from that moment, a suicide bomber is created. At the same time, if a woman becomes a *shahida*, one has to look for deeper, more underlying reasons."

That is just what the men who prepare the women for their deaths know, instinctively perhaps, how to do: "The differences between men and women in a society steeped in fundamentalism and a culture of double standards do not disappear even within that extraordinary concept of martyrdom. Women understand from the beginning that men do not accept them as equals or look upon them as warriors within their ranks until they achieve Paradise and are accepted as such at Allah's table. But by then, they are dead. And, there are no women who can testify to having had those promises fulfilled in another life."

This is an angry book, filled with human emotion, and a frightening one, which is as it should be. This is not a story that will end soon. One child psychologist told Victor that his studies showed, as early as 2001, that among Palestinian school children little girls were just as likely as little boys to say they longed to be suicide bombers. They thought that such a death was the highest honor that life could bring them. Nor is this spreading psychosis of martyrdom, so intimately tied to the humiliations of occupation and the hopelessness of deeply stagnant societies, limited to the West Bank or Gaza. Among men, and among women, it is spreading throughout the Arab and Muslim world, and not

least in Iraq. Here America's ostensible war of liberation has turned very quickly into a thankless and seemingly endless confrontation with hopeless and hostile people. Saddam is gone. Someday soon, Arafat will be, too. But the cult of death that they helped create lives on. And so do the occupations.

—Christopher Dickey
Baghdad, June
2003

INTRODUCTION

THERE ARE CERTAIN MONUMENTAL EVENTS in life that mark us forever, when we remember time, place, and person so vividly that our own actions or thoughts at that moment replace the enormity of the event itself. For each generation the references are different: the attack on Pearl Harbor, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and, of course, September 11, 2001.

Then there are other events that, because we happen to find ourselves in the middle of the fray, touch us more personally; pivotal moments that take a permanent place in our memories. Many of these moments happened for me while I was working as a journalist in the Middle East. The first was in 1982, during the war in Lebanon, when I arrived in Beirut just in time to witness the massacre at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps. When the press was finally allowed into the camps to record the

horrors there, after we had digested the visual shock of bloated bodies and houses reduced to rubble intermingled with an occasional sign of life—a twisted plastic doll, or a broken plate—an incident transpired that has remained with me throughout the years.

A Palestinian woman was sitting on the ground, cradling a lifeless child in her arms, while all around her was the stench of death that lingered after two days and nights of unrelenting carnage. Kneeling down next to her, I asked her the prerequisite media questions: how she felt when she found herself the sole survivor in her family and, more crucial, how she would manage to live the rest of her life with those memories constantly there to torture her. She knew immediately that I was an American, and without any hesitation she looked up at me and said, in surprisingly good English, "You American women talk constantly of equality. Well, you can take a lesson from us Palestinian women. We die in equal numbers to the men." This tragic concept of women's liberation stayed with me.

In one of those horrific ironies that occur more frequently than anyone could imagine unless one is familiar with that part of the world, the other moment that has remained with me forever happened while I was in Ramallah in November 2001, accompanying a French journalist who was filming a report about the Palestinian Red Crescent. My friend was doing a story on these young volunteers as they rode in ambulances, tending to the dead and dying after violent clashes with Israeli soldiers.

The Red Crescent office in Ramallah is housed in a three-story white building with a red tile roof, not far from the town's main square. On the first floor of the headquarters, the room

where the staff gathered in between emergency calls was furnished sparsely with a wrought-iron sofa and kitchen chairs grouped around a low blond-wood table. In one corner of the room, perched high on a wall, a television set tuned to the Palestinian Authority station monitored all events throughout the West Bank and Gaza and gave hourly news reports.

Waiting for the inevitable call that day were five Red Crescent workers, three men and two women who obviously knew each other well. There was casual banter and a lot of joking, although what struck me was how they each rocked back and forth on their chairs, arms clasped tightly around their chests. Their body language was a sign of the extreme stress that each of them undoubtedly felt, given the daily reality of closures, the possibility of a suicide attack within Israel that would bring military reprisals, and knowledge that at any minute they could be called out in the middle of a confrontation. As my friend's camera panned the group, each one gave his or her name and age, beginning with Tared Abed, twenty-seven years old; Ahlam Nasser, twenty-three; Nassam al-Battouni, twenty-two; Bilal Saleh, twenty-three; and Wafa Idris, who said she was twenty-five. Almost immediately the others teased her, since she had apparently lied about her age, making herself younger than she actually was.

Of all the Red Crescent volunteers, Wafa was the most animated; she played with a big elastic band, aiming it playfully at the others like a slingshot. She was a full-figured young woman with long black hair, tinged with henna, and a round face, made up lightly to accentuate her dark eyes and cupid-bow mouth. On her head was a black velvet cap. It was not surprising, given her

cheerful personality and good looks, that I later learned that several Western journalists had asked her out, although, as a good Muslim woman, she had refused their advances.

As I was observing the volunteers, there was a moment when the image on the television showed a man, his head and face wrapped in a checkered red-and-white kaffiyeh to conceal his features, speaking in Arabic, holding a Kalashnikov rifle in one hand and a Koran in the other. While the others continued laughing and talking, I saw Wafa's expression turn suddenly serious as she watched the man on the screen make what was his last speech before he set off to blow himself up in a suicide attack somewhere in Israel. Concentrating on the "martyr's" every word, she sat forward in her chair, her jaw set, her demeanor intense, silent and unmoving until he concluded his videotaped testament to the Palestinian community, his friends, and his family. I remember a gesture Wafa made after the suicide bomber finished his speech; she suddenly raised her right arm and waved.

Two months later, on January 27, 2002, Wafa Idris entered Palestinian infamy when she became the forty-seventh suicide bomber and—more significantly—the first woman kamikaze to blow herself up in the name of the Palestinian struggle. Back in Paris, I would always remember where I was and what I was doing when I heard the news. Several hours later, my journalist friend who had taken me along that November day to the Red Crescent office called to say he had footage of the suicide attack. I rushed over to see it, and while the entire scene was horrifying, the sight of Wafa's body lying in the middle of Jaffa Road in Jerusalem, covered haphazardly with a rubber sheet, was stunning. Even more shocking was the image of an arm, her

right arm, which had been ripped from her body, lying bloody and torn several inches away. At that moment something clicked in my head and I recalled her good-bye that day in Ramallah.

Such acts of "martyrdom" perpetrated by Palestinian militants have taken hundreds of Israeli lives and have resulted in reprisals by the Israeli military, where hundreds more lives, namely Palestinian civilians, have been lost as well. But the constant bloodshed broadcast on television or reported in newspapers and magazines reveals only the immediate aftermath of the devastation and destruction, rarely the effect they have weeks and months later, especially on the people who barely survived them or who lost loved ones. We who watch the gruesome images from afar have almost become inured to their horrors. Certain phrases—explosive belts, martyrdom—have become part of our lexicon, although often their terrible significance eludes us. Yet if anything could jar us into facing the cruel reality of these attacks, perhaps that happened when the world learned that a woman had blown herself up in the heart of Jerusalem.

A week after Wafa's suicide blast, I traveled to the al-Amari refugee camp in an attempt to visit with her family. Approaching the house, which is situated on a narrow alley in the camp, I noticed photographs of Wafa displayed on all the buildings. Children carrying toy guns and rifles ran up excitedly to point to Wafa and ask me to take a picture of them with their heroine, the woman who died a martyr's death. "One of us!" they exclaimed with glee. A group of adults lingered near the Idris home, including several shopkeepers who wanted to share personal anecdotes about Wafa so that I would understand how she was revered.

But the Idris home was deserted, the family gone into hiding. Immediately after Wafa's death, the house had been ransacked and partially destroyed by the Israeli military. Pushing aside the remains of a white metal door that had been torn from its hinges and stepping over shards of glass that had once been the living room windows, I entered. Suddenly, a white, old-fashioned dial telephone on a table began to ring and ring into oblivion. The noise startled me, and it took several seconds to regain my composure.

There were bullet holes in the walls, drawers had been tossed, beds turned upside down, and slashed cushions strewn around the floor of the living room. The only intact items were pictures on the walls of Wafa, in various stages of her brief life: in a graduation gown and cap with a diploma in her hand; standing with a group of Red Crescent workers at a reception with Yasser Arafat; and finally, the now-familiar photo of Wafa wearing a black-and-white checkered kaffiyeh, the symbol of the Fatah organization, with a green bandanna around her head on which was written "Allah Akhbar," or "God is greater than all other gods."

It seemed to me that amidst all the destruction and chaos, Wafa's spirit was still strong and very present in her childhood home. It was hard to leave, but since there was no one to talk to, no one to see, I finally walked out into the street. There were more people crowding around the house and they were pushing and shoving to reach me and talk about Wafa. All of them, regardless of age or gender, said the same thing: that one of their own had become a heroine for the Palestinian struggle—a woman, a symbol of the army of women who were ready to die for the cause.

It was then that the journey began that would take me

throughout the Middle East in an effort to understand this misguided feminist movement, which held up Wafa Idris as an example of the new, liberated Palestinian woman.

In the course of my research for this book—and while I simultaneously filmed a documentary on the same subject, which was broadcast on French television in February 2003—three more women strapped on explosive belts, following in Wafa's footsteps, and blew themselves up in the name of Allah. As I traveled throughout Gaza and from one West Bank town to another, interviewing the families and friends of the four women who had succeeded in giving their lives, as well as approximately eighty girls and young women who had tried and failed, I discovered the hard reality that it was never another woman who recruited the suicide bombers. Without exception, these women had been trained by a trusted member of the family—a brother, an uncle—or an esteemed religious leader, teacher, or family friend, all of whom were men. What I also discovered was that all four who died, plus the others who had tried and failed to die a martyr's death, had personal problems that made their lives untenable within their own culture and society.

I found that there were, in fact, very different motives and rewards for the men who died a martyr's death than for the women. Consequently, it became essential for me to understand the reasoning of the men who provide the moral justification for the seduction and indoctrination that eventually convinces a woman or girl that the most valuable thing she can do with her life is end it; at the same time, I saw it was crucial to understand the social environment that pushes these young women over the edge of personal despair.

What stunned me as I questioned these men, some of whom were in jail, was that all of them, by virtue of their powerful role in these women's lives, had managed to convince their sisters, daughters, wives, or their charges that given their "moral transgressions" or the errors made by a male family member, the only way to redeem themselves and the family name was to die a martyr's death. Only then would these women enjoy everlasting life filled with happiness, respect, and luxury and finally be elevated to an equal par with men. Only in Paradise, and only if they killed themselves and took Israeli lives with them.

For more than a year I traveled with a cameraman throughout the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel, interviewing people on audiotape and on camera, including members and leaders of Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, and the various factions of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, along with Israeli government officials, academics, psychiatrists, medical personnel, intelligence officers, historians, and feminists on both sides of the Green Line. I also spoke with families and friends of the victims of suicide bombings. At the end of my journey, because of the honesty of the many voices of reason on both sides of this struggle, it became obvious that a culture of death had permeated Palestinian society and destroyed the lives of many adults, as well as guaranteed the destruction of future generations.

This book tells the story of the women who died for reasons that go beyond the liberation of Palestine. If nothing else, let it serve as an example of the exploitation of women taken to a cynical and lethal extreme.

CHAPTER ONE

ON DECEMBER 11, 1987, after twenty years of almost passive resignation, the Palestinian population took action to end Israeli occupation. It was on that day that an uprising, or Intifada, erupted throughout the West Bank and Gaza. The image of Palestinian youngsters hurling rocks at Israeli soldiers and armored vehicles—a reenactment of the David and Goliath myth—became one of the Intifada's most memorable symbols. The other central and perhaps even more significant symbol was the Palestinian woman, who for the first time in the history of her culture was involved in and indicted for acts of subversion and sabotage and jailed in Israeli prisons.

During this unprecedented offensive, women wrote and circulated leaflets, joined in demonstrations and protests, scrawled slogans on the walls of buildings, hoisted flags, donated blood, violated curfews and closures, and helped organize alternative

means of educating their children. Women defied the Israeli army's policy of confiscating Palestinian agricultural produce. They physically tried to prevent Palestinian boys and men from being arrested. "Behold our women," one revolutionary leaflet proclaimed, "a fighting force comparable to that of our men. A giant step has been taken towards the equality of Palestinian women."

While the role of the Palestinian woman was unusual in this society, it was not unlike the role of all women when their men are off fighting or held as prisoners of war. They found themselves in charge of educating the children, of working in the fields, of running the family business. Even after the men were eventually released from jail but still required to observe the curfew imposed by the Israeli army that prevented them from resuming their normal activities, women continued to run the financial and emotional aspects of their lives.

Feeling their own power and independence, women throughout the West Bank and Gaza began to shorten their skirts, wear trousers, and leave their heads uncovered. Zahira Kamal, a feminist from Gaza who had been a member of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) until she broke off to join a splinter group, recalls those days. "By breaking the chains of the occupation, the women also broke the handcuffs of their own existence."

The more liberal and intellectual portion of Palestinian society believed that the participation of women in the first Intifada was a positive step forward for women. In fact, Palestinian women became a beacon of hope for equality for their sisters throughout the Arab world. By actively participating, women embodied its twin goals: nationalism and social liberation. Zahira Kamal claims that, finally, the Intifada "not only challenged the Israelis for the first time in a way

that did not provoke negative world reaction, but it changed the second-class status of women within the Palestinian community."

Feminists and peace activists on the Israeli side agree. Nomi Chazan, a member of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) from the left-wing Meretz Party and a close friend and colleague with Zahira Kamal through their work in the Palestinian and Israeli Women for Peace movement, says, "Perhaps more than a step forward to end occupation back in 1987, the [involvement of women] was a step forward in creating a democratic society where women are equal and not under the control of religious extremists."

The road to equality for Palestinian women, expressed in the desire for a better life as well as the right to actively participate in the resistance, turned out not to be smooth. There were formidable setbacks and backlashes that put an end to their struggling equally with the men. A little over a year after the beginning of the first Intifada, the influence of radical Islamic groups, such as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, were gaining power in the streets, and, as a result, took a position against women participating in violent demonstrations. Islamic clerics were adamant that the woman's place was in the home with her family and not roaming the streets unchaperoned. The women's proper function in life was to give birth as early and as often as possible. Women were ordered to resume their traditional roles of wives, mothers, and homemakers, a demand that was eventually obeyed. It was a blow to the progress Palestinian women had made during the first year of the uprising, although not

surprising coming from organizations that were steeped in fundamentalist Islamic doctrine.

What was surprising was that even among the more moderate Palestinian leadership, there was a unanimous decision to curtail the participation of women in the first Intifada, mainly because they feared any divisiveness between the various political and religious groups throughout the West Bank and Gaza would hurt the outcome of their struggle. As a result, regardless of the religious, political, or psychological reasons that united the extremists with the more moderate segment of Palestinian society over this issue, the result was that even among women themselves, equality became secondary to the success of the national cause. The change was swift and visible.

Shalom Harrari is a former Israeli intelligence officer who was in charge of the Occupied Territories for twenty years until his retirement in 2000. "The Hamas leadership issued a formal edict stating that women were not allowed out in public without covering their head with the *hijab* and wearing the *jilbab* [long-sleeved blouses and long skirts]," Colonel Harrari explains. Fathers and brothers were urged to supervise and control the behavior of female family members with the utmost strictness. "Had we protested," Zahira Kamal adds, "Hamas would have taken action against us, and with the Palestinians at variance with each other, Israel would have found it much easier to crush the uprising."

When the role of women diminishes in any political struggle, it is a sign that the role of women in general throughout society diminishes. When a Palestinian man, especially a father, saw his daughter being arrested and searched by male soldiers, it was unbearable for him. Given the economic problems that

diminished Palestinian men as the viable head of the family and the influence of the extremists that called for women to remain in the background, it was only logical that men would eventually resent the occupation more in conjunction with the involvement and arrest of their women.

The humiliation and rage that Palestinian men felt when their women were "handled" by soldiers forced the Israelis to adopt different rules. Shalom Harrari recalls how the army's role was very limited. "Basically, if we touched a woman to search her," he explains, "we touched her honor, which in turn implicated her family, and eventually her entire village felt it was their responsibility to defend her honor. In the end, the soldiers found themselves confronting the civilian population over the honor of their women."

While the majority of Palestinian women obeyed the edict, there were a few who began committing violent acts against Israeli soldiers and civilians that some analysts believe were a harbinger of things to come. Shalom Harrari contends that several left-wing communist and Marxist factions of the PLO encouraged women to commit what are known as *Jihad Fardi*, which translates into English as "personal initiative attacks." "In these kinds of attacks," he explains, "there are no formal organizations behind them. They are simply individuals who make the decision to attack and risk their lives because of largely personal reasons." According to Harrari, in the 1970s there were numerous incidents where men crossed the Jordan River into Israel with the Koran in one hand and a pistol or a knife in the other. "Knowing that there was a good chance they would be overcome and killed in the end," he says, "they attacked soldiers guarding Israeli fortifications and usually managed to take with them one or two soldiers before they were shot."

In 1988, after women were forbidden to venture out into the streets during the Intifada, many of those personal initiative attacks, not only on the Jordanian border but also within Israel proper, were committed by women.

Dr. Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi is an attractive man in his late forties who was educated in Jordan and trained as a pediatrician in England. Although his activities with Hamas, as the second in command as well as the organization's spokesman, keep him busy, he still lectures in pediatric medicine at the local university in Gaza. During an interview with Dr. al-Rantisi, he explained that it was easier for women to hide a knife or a pistol under their *jilbab* and pass through security than it was for men. "Those Palestinian women who dared to risk their lives by committing acts of Jihad Fardi," Dr. al-Rantisi explains, "were determined to continue to struggle against the occupation on an equal basis with the men."

Mohammed Dahalan, the former head of Yasser Arafat's security force in the West Bank who resigned to become the head of Fatah in Gaza and who is now the head of security in the new government recently formed by Abu Mazen, the new Palestinian prime minister, suggests a shift in perspective on women after 1988. "Not only did Palestinian women believe that by doing these actions they were maintaining their equality," Dahalan explains, "but the leaders of the various factions also realized that as long as women were dressed in the proper attire, they could be used more effectively to penetrate security and transport weapons."

Still, Shalom Harrari cautions that the incidents of women committing these actions were very few and in no way changed the rules that had been set down by the more militant factions like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. "It is only significant in that the

leadership understood," he says, "that our soldiers did not view women as big a threat as men."

Despite the lack of lasting progress for women, out of the devastation of the first Intifada came the first real Middle East peace initiative. In 1991, four years after the uprising began, what some of the more cynical among us thought was a false sporadic calm actually culminated in a peace conference between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Further, in a move that was considered a harbinger of women's rights, Hanan Ashrawi, an American-educated Christian Palestinian who taught English literature at Bir Zeit University in Ramallah, won an official position on the world stage.

As the spokesperson for the Palestinian Liberation Organization during that initial peace conference in Madrid, Ashrawi helped inspire a sense that the PLO was a bona fide political entity rather than an international terrorist organization. The conference culminated with that now-famous handshake between the late Israeli prime minister Yitzak Rabin and PLO leader Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn, under the beaming gaze of then U.S. president Bill Clinton, on September 13, 1993. Subtly, Ashrawi herself had sent a message to the world: Not only could a woman in a male-dominated Arab society become the voice of reason in an area fraught with conflict, but a Christian woman in a predominantly Muslim society offered all Palestinian women evidence that they could finally participate in the creation of a Palestinian state on an equal basis to the men.

There seemed to be a new era dawning in that region of the world, not only of peace but of gender equality. Ashrawi even tried to organize a parliament of women to oppose a burgeoning movement toward radical Islam. For a while, Ashrawi's progressive rhetoric gained momentum, especially given her status as one of only a few women professors at Bir Zeit University. But once again it was not to be. After the failure of the Oslo Accord, not only did Hanan Ashrawi fade from the political arena in the years that followed, but the influence and control that the extreme Islamic groups regained changed the climate at home. Hamas activists increased their control of the streets throughout the West Bank and Gaza and even gained control of the Christian student council at Bir Zeit University. Ashrawi's voice was silenced.

With their dreams of equality and a better life ultimately dashed in the first uprising, the role of women in the current Intifada, which began in September 2000, was destined to change. So was the entire nature of the uprising. Suicide bombings in the West Bank and Gaza and throughout Israel proper signaled the unleashing of a new terror weapon. In the beginning, this new and deadly tactic was planned by extreme Islamic groups and implemented by men, all of whom were against any peace accord with Israel and in favor of the creation of an Islamic state in its place.

Suicide attacks became the ultimate "smart bomb" of the poor. They were efficient and spectacular, and there was no fear that the perpetrator could be caught and interrogated. But even more significant is that those who strapped on explosive belts or drove bomb-laden cars into civilian areas became instant superstars throughout the West Bank and Gaza. It was then that Yasser Arafat and his more secular Fatah organization, along with several militant

factions under the auspices of his group, realized the success of these missions in crushing the morale, spirit, and hope within Israeli society. More significant, he saw how public opinion had shifted away from his secular organization to the radical Islamic movements.

In the summer of 2000, Arafat was seen as a negotiator who had been too willing to make concessions with both the Americans and the Israelis. His role as president of the Palestinian Authority was at risk. He had failed to keep promises to the Palestinians concerning the area of a potential state, he was incapable of forcing Israel to dismantle old settlements and stop building new ones, and he had proved himself ill-equipped to control the sentiment in the streets, which was increasingly in favor of the Islamic Jihad and Hamas.

It was for those reasons that Arafat made a decision that he believed would ultimately guarantee him a wider base of power to confront the opposition at home as well as in Israel. The beleaguered Palestinian leader judged that for the good of the people in the long term, to avoid a militant Islamic regime in the area, he would give his tacit approval to suicide attacks, not only to wreak havoc throughout Israel but also to control his detractors and elevate his standing within the community.

Curiously, it was not the first time that a secular Arab leader had followed the example of an ultra-religious opposition party. In 1985 in Syria, the late president Hafez al-Assad, an Aleuwite Christian, recruited people from the Syrian National Socialist Party in Lebanon in an attempt to "secularize" suicide bombings and to garner support in the street away from the religious portion of the population.

In September 2000, at the outbreak of the current Intifada, the

al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade began taking credit for suicide bombings and other attacks in the name of Allah. In hindsight, it was a logical development. The current uprising, called the al-Aqsa Intifada from its inception, was based on the notion that Israel had plans to destroy the al-Aqsa holy mosque in Jerusalem. In a very real sense, by unleashing the al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade, Arafat responded to his people's demand to implement actions instead of words. But while Hamas and Islamic Jihad had no problem finding men who were willing to die in the name of Allah, Arafat had great difficulty mobilizing those loyal to his political faction to commit acts of martyrdom.

Ehud Ya'ari, an Israeli television journalist and terrorism expert, explains. "There were major problems with this Intifada from the beginning. It was never a real uprising because it is a top-down operation that started from the leadership on down and not with the people on the streets, on the ground level, the way the first Intifada did."

For the first few months, despite Arafat's willingness to unleash his forces to commit suicide attacks, he found that he was unable to get the masses involved in military operations. "There was an inner conflict," Sari Nusseibeh, a Palestinian intellectual, explains. "Generally speaking, the majority of Palestinians were against the Intifada but were desperate enough to commit violent acts in response to the brutality of the occupation."

What Arafat needed was a weapon that would impress his Islamic opponents and terrorize his Israeli enemy. To resolve his floundering political control over the Palestinian Authority, Arafat shifted the emphasis of his military operations onto a very special kind of suicide bomber.