

# Disempowered Palestinian Girls' Uncommon Death Wishes— Research Sheds Light

By Lina Sagara Reyes

JERUSALEM – Some young girls in the Occupied Palestine Territories are wishing to be *shaheeds*, martyrs-in-waiting. But contrary to perceptions shaped by media, not many of them are hard-lined militants or Islamic extremists. In fact, some could belong to Palestine's Christian minority.

Prof. Nadira Shalhoub Kevorkian of Hebrew University told a forum recently that many young girls had wanted to get information on how to enlist in the roster of would-be suicide bombers, and not all of them are Muslims.

"They would ask if I'd know of a way, either through an Internet site or an emissary, so they could join a listing of suicide bombers," said Kevorkian. "And they appeared serious, not joking at all."

Since 1996, young Palestinian women have been suicide bombers while some have attempted but failed to explode bombs strapped on their bodies. All of them were Muslims.

In April 2002, three young women strapped explosives to their bodies and became human bombers. Aged 18, 20 and 21, they were members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a militant but secular Muslim group as differentiated from the fundamentalist Al Queda, Hamas, Islamic Jihad or Hizbollah. In 2003 and 2004, at least two young women exploded themselves. But the desperate wish had already taken root in several minds, including those of young Palestine Christians, which make up about one percent of the population.

Speaking before women leaders from 14 countries who were on a solidarity visit this summer to Palestinian communities, Kevorkian shared preliminary

findings of an ongoing study on the effects of the prolonged armed conflict among girl-children. She stressed, however, that the results are still tentative.

Kevorkian's research zeroed in on the effects of the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, specifically on how the Israeli-built Separation Barrier or Security Wall had impinged on the lives of young women, aged 15-18, who are schooled in Jerusalem but live elsewhere in the West Bank or at the outskirts of Jerusalem. The daily routine of going to school for these girls include inspections at checkpoints, closures, curfews, roadblocks, harassment and, sometimes, blatant abuse, the professor revealed. This, as the barrier continues to be built deeper into the West Bank.

The Israeli government built the barrier of concrete walls, razor wire, fencing and trenches to keep Palestinian suicide bombers and other attackers from entering Israel. Began in June 2002, already a quarter of the planned 640-mile long, nine-meter high barrier has been built on the north-west edge of the West Bank; on either side of Jerusalem; and in the Jordan Valley. Palestinians are against the wall, which they say is a land grab, restricting their mobility and ruining houses, uprooting centuries-old olive groves, and preventing them from building a state of their own.

The latest land seizures and wall construction were in the village of Biddu, in Jerusalem and near the Israeli settlement of Ariel, in the West Bank heartland, 20 miles north of Jerusalem.

In June 2004, the Israeli Supreme Court declared that the barrier had encroached on at least 20 kilometers of Palestinian land. The case before the Supreme Court had concerned a section of the fence that was planned to run through Palestinian land from the town of Modi'in to Givat Ze'ev, a settlement out-



Una Sagara Reyes

Young Palestinian women wearing heirloom tribal garb gather at a social center at the West Bank Jalazon refugee camp near Ramallah.

side Jerusalem. It is an area in which 35,000 Palestinians live, many of whom would have been separated from land cultivated with olive and fruit trees. The route “severely violated” freedom of movement and “severely impaired” the livelihood of locals, leaving villages in a “virtual chokehold,” as the British paper *The Guardian* had quoted the Israeli court’s ruling. Still on July 8 this year, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague said that the barrier through the West Bank is a political measure and not a security one, and a *de facto* land grab. The ICJ judges told Israel to tear it down and compensate the victims.

“It (wishing to be suicide bombers) doesn’t really come to their minds out of a belief in a better afterlife, or see it as revolutionary mission. Some of them really just get desperate,” Kevorkian said, as she continued to talk about her study. “Imagine going through the checkpoints daily. Missing tests because the flow of the inspection was so slow and, at times, you get detained for a more thorough check-up. The embarrassment and humiliation, you know, these can add up...fill a vessel. For young people, these could be major catastrophes.”

Two years ago in the wake of 9/11, the feminist Robin Morgan re-issued her landmark book *The Demon Lover: The Roots of Terrorism*. In the book, Morgan

posits that women are “token” terrorists only because they get involved due to the “demon lover syndrome,” their love for a particular man: a fraternal or paternal connection but, more commonly, a romantic or marital bond. First published in 1989 and re-issued in 2001, Morgan’s book is based on her travels to the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and within the Occupied Territories where she had deep conversations with Palestinian women. By focusing on the personal experiences of these Palestinian women refugees, Morgan explained on why women, particularly human bombers, chose violence and terrorism.

The Kevorkian study, however, opens a different dimension to this uncommon death wish for young women in the West Bank. The professor, the only Palestinian on the School of Law Faculty in Hebrew University, gathered some of these girls, Muslims and Christians alike, from two high schools and a technical school, and had engaged them in focus group discussions since November 2003. Later, she also talked individually with those who felt they needed to talk.

The professor said she believes that talking and writing about the situation has a cathartic and therapeutic effect among the young women. Some kind of narrative, whether verbal, written or photographic, is a salve, if not, medicine.

In a sharp departure from the clinical methods of research she had as a criminologist and clinician at Hebrew University's Institute of Criminology, Kevorkian used in her new study the largely subjective method of narratives in order to allow young girls to express themselves in their own language (Arabic) or through photographs, and their works would then be windows into their psyche. "Some are into researches that measure effects like depression through diagnostic tests. I could do that but I choose a different way, which is more personal and respectful of the Palestinian sensibility," she said.

Groups like the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (ARIJ) had called the Wall the "Apartheid Wall." Prof. Jad Irgshad of ARIJ told the solidarity group that the Wall had made undeclared *Bantustans* out of the now non-contiguous areas of the Palestine. A *Bantustan*, in the then-white dominated South Africa, was a territory or enclave designated for black South Africans during the Apartheid period.

Kevorkian's study pointed out that while the Wall makes *Bantustans* out of the separated Palestinian areas, it also makes individuals more withdrawn and alienated, creating inner *Bantustans* within people. And that it is taking its toll mostly on the psyche of growing children, particularly the young women.

"News reports on the Wall have excluded its effects on young girls. We want to make young women visible and their welfare be considered in policymaking towards conflict resolution," Kevorkian said. She added that the girls wanted to reach out to their parents and teachers. "They want their parents and families to understand their plight. To be more considerate, to help them get to school despite the odds. They want their teachers to know what they undergo every day and understand them better."

Even after the focus group discussions, the young girls continued to write short pieces to Kevorkian, dropping the notes at the YWCA office. Some of these notes yielded troubling information that needed careful handling and counseling, like accounts of abuse at the checkpoints.

Holly Dhynnes, World Vision International (WVI) advocacy officer and who assists in the project, said that her organisation recognised the importance of the

project in highlighting the rights of the girl-children in times of armed conflicts as well as their potential as resources in peace-building.

The research will be finished later in 2004, and by early 2005 Kevorkian might be ready with a full-blown report.

Others involved in the research think it might aid in finding ways to prevent these girls from acting on their death wishes and dealing with growing up amid conflict.

"We have here a possible scenario when young women will join groups that espouse violence as suicide bombers not because of extremists religious beliefs but simply because of the dreaded mix of teenage melancholy and the depression build-up because of the daily acts of oppression," Kevorkian stressed.

There are about 1,024,000 Palestinian students in the school year 2003-2004, according to the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Education. The dropout rate among Palestinian girls is 12 percent, slightly higher than the boys' nine percent, a 1998 UNICEF study showed.

"It is not just research for its own sake. We hope to get further than this. We need to teach our young women daily acts of resistance, too. We need to offer them hope, an alternative to extremism, a counter-culture of hope rather than pessimism and cynicism," urged Mira Rizek, president of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)-Palestine, host of the forum where the professor spoke and the solidarity visit of the women leaders.

The YWCA and the WVI, a child-focused organisation, supported the Kevorkian study. "The results can help us strategise. It can be pro-active mechanism to help make the emotional fiber of these girls stronger," said Aba Nasir, YWCA-Palestine secretary-general. ♪

*Lina Sagaral Reyes is a journalist based in Mindanao, Philippines. Her main abiding interest has been in writing non-fiction on gender and development issues. Lina was in the Occupied Palestine Territories to attend the Young Women's Christian Association Conference in Jerusalem when she wrote this article.*

WOMEN IN ACTION NO. 3-2004