

Europe



Malika El Aroud by her computer in her living room at her home in Brussels in April, with a poster in Arabic promoting her support of Osama Bin Laden and Jihad. (Hazel Thompson for The New York Times)

Belgian woman wages war for Al Qaeda on the Web

Belgian's online jihad reflects rise of female extremists

By Elaine Sciolino and Souad Mekhennet
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BRUSSELS: On the street, Malika El Aroud is anonymous in an Islamic black veil covering all but her eyes.

In her living room, El Aroud, a 48-year-old Belgian, wears the ordinary look of middle age: a plain black T-shirt and pants and curly brown hair. The only adornment is a pair of powder-blue slippers monogrammed in gold with the letters SEXY.

But it is on the Internet that El Aroud has distinguished herself. Writing in French under the name Oum Obeyda, she has transformed herself into one of the most prominent Internet jihadists in Europe.

She calls herself a female holy warrior for Al Qaeda. She insists that she does not disseminate instructions on bomb-making and has no intention of taking up arms herself. Rather, she browbeats Muslim men to go and fight, and rallies women to join the cause.

"It's not my role to set off bombs - that's ridiculous," she said in a rare interview. "I have a weapon. It's to write. It's to speak out. That's my jihad. You can do many things with words. Writing is also a bomb."

El Aroud has not only made a name for herself among devotees of radical forums where she broadcasts her message of hatred toward the West. She also is well known to intelligence officials throughout Europe as simply "Malika" - an Islamist who is at the forefront of the movement by women to take a larger role in the male-dominated global jihad.

The authorities have noted an increase in suicide bombings carried out by women - the American military reports that 18 women have conducted suicide missions in Iraq so far this year, compared with 8 all of last year - but they say there is also a less violent yet potentially more insidious army of women organizers, proselytizers, teachers, translators and fund-raisers, who either join their husbands in the fight or step into the breach as men are jailed or killed.

"Women are coming of age in jihad and are entering a world once reserved for men," said **Claude Moniquet**, president of the Brussels-based European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center.

"Malika is a role model, an icon who is bold enough to use her own name. She plays a very important strategic role as a source of inspiration. She's very clever - and extremely dangerous."

El Aroud began her rise to prominence because of a man in her life. Two days before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, her husband carried out a bombing in Afghanistan that killed the anti-Taliban warlord Ahmed Shah Massoud at the behest of Osama bin Laden. Her husband was killed, and she took to the Internet as the widow of a martyr.

She remarried, and she and her new husband were convicted in Switzerland for operating pro-Qaeda Web sites. Now, according to the Belgian authorities, she is a suspect in what the authorities say they believe is a plot to carry out an attack in Belgium.

"Vietnam is nothing compared to what awaits you in our lands," she wrote to a supposed Western audience in March about wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Ask your mothers, your wives to order your coffins." To her followers she added: "Victory is appearing on the horizon, my brothers and sisters. Let's intensify our prayers."

Her prolific writing and presence in chat rooms, coupled with her background, makes her a magnet for praise and sympathy. "Sister Oum Obeyda is virtuous among the virtuous; her life is dedicated to the good on this earth," a man named Juba wrote late last year.

The rise of women comes against a backdrop of discrimination that has permeated radical Islam. Mohamed Atta, the Sept. 11 hijacker, wrote in his will that "women must not be present at my funeral or go to my grave at any later date." Last month, Ayman al-Zawahri, Al Qaeda's second in command, said in an online question-and-answer session that women could not join Al Qaeda.

In response, a woman wrote on a password-protected radical Web site that "the answer that we heard was not what we had hoped," according to the SITE monitoring group, adding, "I swear to God I will never leave the path and will not give up this course."

The changing role of women in the movement is particularly apparent in Western countries, where Muslim women have been educated to demand their rights and Muslim men are more accustomed to treating them as equals.

El Aroud reflects that trend. "Normally in Islam the men are stronger than the women, but I prove that it is important to fear God - and no one else," she said. "It is important that I am a woman. There are men who don't want to speak out because they are afraid of getting into trouble. Even when I get into trouble, I speak out."

After all, she said, she knows the rules. "I write in a legal way," she said. "I know what I'm doing. I'm Belgian. I know the system."

That system has often been lenient for her. She was detained last December with 13 others in a suspected plot to free a convicted terrorist from prison and to mount an attack in Brussels. But Belgian law required that they be released within 24 hours because no charges were brought and searches failed to turn up weapons, explosives or incriminating documents.

Now, even as El Aroud remains under constant surveillance, she is back home rallying militants on her Web site - and collecting more than \$1,100 a month in government unemployment benefits.

"Her jihad is not to lead an operation but to inspire other people to wage jihad," said Glenn Audenaert, the director of Belgium's federal police force. "She enjoys the protection that Belgium offers. At the same time, she is a potential threat."

Born in Morocco, raised from a young age in Belgium, El Aroud did not seem destined for the jihad.

Growing up, she rebelled against her Muslim upbringing, she wrote in a memoir. Her first marriage, at 18, was unhappy and brief; she later bore a daughter out of wedlock.

She was unable to read Arabic, but her discovery of the Koran in French led her to embrace a strict version of Islam and eventually to marry Abdessatar Dahmane, a Tunisian loyal to Osama bin Laden.

Eager to be a battlefield warrior, she hoped to fight alongside her husband in Chechnya. But the Chechens "wanted experienced men, super-well trained," she said. "They wanted women even less." In 2001, she followed her husband to Afghanistan. As he trained at a Qaeda camp, she was installed in a camp for foreign women in Jalalabad.

For her, the Taliban were a model Islamic government; reports of their mistreatment of women were untrue. "Women didn't have problems under the Taliban," she insisted. "They had security."

Her only rebellion was against the burka, the restrictive garment the Taliban forced on women, which she called "a plastic bag." As a foreigner, she was allowed to wear a long black veil instead.

After her husband's mission, El Aroud was briefly detained by Massoud's followers. Frightened, she was put in contact with the Belgian authorities, who arranged for her safe passage home.

"We got her out and thought she'd cooperate with us," said one senior Belgian intelligence official. "We were deceived."

Judge Jean-Louis Bruguière, who was France's senior counterterrorism magistrate at the time, said he interviewed El Aroud because investigators suspected that she had shipped electronic equipment to her husband that was used in the killing. "She is very radical, very sly and very dangerous," he said.

El Aroud was tried with 22 others in Belgium for complicity in the Massoud murder. A grieving widow in a black veil, she persuaded the court that she had been doing humanitarian work and knew nothing of her husband's plans. She was acquitted for lack of evidence.

Her husband's death, though, propelled her into a new life. "The widow of a martyr is very important for Muslims," she said.

She used her enhanced status to meet her new "brothers and sisters" on the Web. One of them was Moez Garsalloui, a Tunisian several years her junior who had political refugee status in Switzerland. They married and moved to a small Swiss village. There, they ran several pro-Qaeda Web sites and Internet forums that were monitored by Swiss authorities as part of the country's first Internet-related criminal case.

After the police raided their home and arrested them at dawn in April 2005, El Aroud described extensively what she called their abuse.

"See what this country that calls us neutral made us suffer," she wrote, claiming that the Swiss police beat and blindfolded her husband and manhandled her while she was sleeping unveiled.

Convicted last June of promoting violence and supporting a criminal organization, she received a six-month suspended sentence; Garsalloui, who was convicted of more serious charges, was released after 23 days.

Despite El Aroud's prominence, it is once again her husband whom authorities view as a bigger threat. They suspect he was recruiting for the feared Christmastime attacks last December and that he has connections to terror groups operating in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

The authorities say that they lost track of him after he was released from jail last year in Switzerland. "He is on a trip," El Aroud says cryptically when asked about her husband's whereabouts. "On a trip."

Meanwhile, her stature has risen with her claims of victimization by the Swiss. The Web site Voice of the Oppressed described her as "our female holy warrior of the 21st century."

El Aroud's latest tangle with the law hints at a deeper involvement of women in terror activities. When she was detained last December in the suspected plot to free Nizar Trabelsi, a convicted terrorist and a one-time professional soccer player, El Aroud was one of three women taken in for questioning.

Although the identities of those detained were not released, the Belgian authorities and others familiar with the case said that among those detained were Trabelsi's wife and Fatima Aberkan, a friend of El Aroud and a 47-year-old mother of seven.

"Malika is a source of inspiration for women because she is telling women to stop sleeping and open their eyes," Aberkan said.

El Aroud operates from her three-room apartment above a clothing shop in a working-class Brussels neighborhood where she spends her time communicating with supporters on her main forum, Minbar-SOS.

Although she insists she is not breaking the law, she knows the police are watching. And if the authorities find way to put her in prison, she said: "That would be great. They would make me a living martyr."