

# HOLY WARRIOR'S JIHAD JOURNEY

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*A teacher tells **Rania Abouzeid** of his conversion to the world of Zarqawi terror*

LIKE many Arabs, the 35-year-old Lebanese teacher followed events in Iraq with dismay. Although he had no love for Saddam Hussein's brutal regime, the US occupation was humiliating.

Still, he was hopeful that the US might bring democracy to the country -- until the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and the almost daily images of Iraqis dying compelled the Sunni Muslim to sneak through Syria into Iraq and become a foreign fighter.

The handsome, middle-class man with a PhD was recruited into Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaida Group of Jihad, which has claimed responsibility for the beheadings of some hostages and numerous suicide attacks in Iraq.

On a rainy afternoon in his sleepy home town in the flat, fertile Bekaa Valley, the stocky young man explained his reasons for embarking on jihad, providing a rare insight into the mind of a mujahed, or holy warrior.

Dressed in jeans and a beige woollen jumper, the teacher sat on a low couch in the modest living room of his home, surrounded by hundreds of books heaped into tall, neat piles.

He spoke with admiration for Jordanian-born terrorist Zarqawi and reverently of al-Qa'ida's Osama bin Laden, whom he referred to as "Sheik Osama".

A recent British study of 500 al-Qa'ida members revealed that most were young, educated and financially comfortable, dispelling

Western assumptions that they were poor men with nothing to live for who seek glory in death.

The teacher, who spoke on the condition that neither his name nor his village be mentioned, said his experience in Iraq supported this.

His journey to jihad began last northern spring, after one of the veterans of the Iraq war agreed to vouch for him. He packed only a few clothes, a small radio and \$US3500 (\$4500) in cash he had saved from his salary. Foreign fighters had to cover all of their expenses, the teacher said, adding that he paid an Iraqi guide \$500 to get him into the country.

He took a short bus ride from his village to the nearby Syrian border and effortlessly slipped across.

The passage across the Syrian-Iraqi border was not as easy. The Syrians arrested four men ahead of him, apparently for possessing incomplete identity papers, so he opted to sneak across the border and walk through the desert rather than risk being turned back.

Once in Iraq, he and his guide drove down to Baghdad and met a contact under a bridge, who took the teacher to a safe house in the Iraqi capital. "They are not like the impoverished children of Palestinian refugee camps," he said of the 15 Saudis, Yemenis and Kuwaitis he met in the villa.

"They are wealthy men with dreams of jihad. Jihad is more important than my own life, and religion is the centre of my life. It was the same for the young men I encountered."

Most of his housemates were educated, middle-class young men, with little or no experience with weapons. A few, however, were veterans of the Afghan conflict and some had travelled from Tora Bora, where bin Laden was believed to have been holed up at one time. "We would talk for hours about the type of Islamic government we wanted to install in Iraq," he said.

The teacher's conversation was peppered with verses from the Koran, which he recited to justify his views on everything from the

killing of Iraqis to the kidnapping of hostages. Everything was grounded in religion, or episodes from Islamic history.

With regard to hostages, for example, he said Islamic sharia law demanded that they be protected, not killed, and that most of those killed "were harming Muslims".

"We are not bloodthirsty," he said, smoothing his closely trimmed brown beard. "We don't like killing for the sake of killing."

He said "mistakes" had been made and that aid workers and many other hostages should not have been killed, but he could not see shades of grey when it came to Iraqis or other Arabs working with the US military.

"Any person who helps the Americans, cooks for them, washes for them, supports them or even sells to them deserves to be killed, even in cold blood. The Americans came to Iraq, but they didn't come alone. They had eyes and ears on the ground.

"In Islam, spies should be killed. This is the philosophy behind killing Iraqi soldiers.

"The Americans know that they cannot establish a viable government in Iraq without the Iraqi Army. Why have they been unable to recreate the army? What's stopped them? The suicide car bombs into the recruiting centres. I was there and I saw their effectiveness."

The teacher was so impressed with their "effectiveness" that he volunteered to become a suicide car-bomber and was taken to another safe house in the Sunni flashpoint city of Fallujah. He did not encounter Zarqawi during his stay in the town, but boasted of meeting several of his aides.

The house was full of Saudis waiting to undertake their own suicide missions. The men, he said, were organised into groups of about 50 and were selected for their tasks based on their experience and value.

As he waited for his turn to come, he said he realised a suicide mission might not be the best way to serve the cause. So after about a month in Iraq he made the long journey back through the Iraqi desert to the Syrian border, where he bribed the border police with \$US200 and returned home.

“In Iraq, they need thinkers more than they need fighters,” he said.  
“As a teacher, I am able to mould 100 young men through ideology.

“When I meet my maker I will be asked to justify why I chose death and jihad and I will say ‘I went in your name and for your glory’. But what if I am asked to justify why I left fertile young minds to the Baathists, the communists and others?

“This is not just about fighting the Americans with weapons. There are many ways to win a war.”