



INVISIBLE MARTYRS

INSIDE THE SECRET WORLD
OF FEMALE ISLAMIC RADICALS

Farhana Qazi

Praise for *Invisible Martyrs*

“Distorting the teachings of religion is not unique to extreme Islam in our time. We find it everywhere, and we all need to address it if we are to mend our world, which is undergoing a deep moral crisis. This book focuses on women who are recruited by radical organizations that distort the teaching of Islam. I share the author’s conclusion that, as we have always seen in the past, those who have no regard for human life cannot succeed. The teachings of compassion and justice shared by all the major faiths will continue to prevail.”

—**Rabbi Mordecai Schreiber**

“Farhana Qazi continues to serve as an ambassador between religions and cultures in difficult and violent times. Her book is a must-read to separate the peaceful practice of Islam from violent extremism.”

—**Ambassador Akbar Ahmed, Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies,
American University**

“Farhana Qazi focuses on the importance of going local as the foundation for countering and preventing violent extremism, understanding that Muslims are the front line in the global war on terrorism.”

—**Stephen M. Apatow, President, Humanitarian Resource Institute**

“Farhana Qazi highlights the precious gift of Islam in this book, which is to bring the misguided female extremist closer to the truth and understand a religion of love and mercy.”

—**Jennifer Sue Parker, senior commander, US military**

“Farhana Qazi takes the reader on a well-written and analytically sharp tour of the world of women who kill in the name of God.”

—**Peter Bergen, Vice President, New America Foundation, and National Security
Analyst, CNN**

“Farhana Qazi’s new book, *Invisible Martyrs*, is an authentic revelation of how Islam can be skewed by some, thus distorting the core fundamental goodness of the faith of Islam, and especially for gender issues. In this complex and volatile world, women reject terrorism and conflict—they search for peace, justice, and rights. Bravo to Farhana with this most important message in her new book.”

—**Lois A. Herman, Coordinator, Women’s UN Report Network**

“Informed by her own experience and personal encounters, Qazi’s book takes us inside the mindset of those who, contrary to their own religious beliefs and to society’s perceptions of women as nurturers, instead become its murderous fanatics. While avoiding the alarmist prose and political agendas that color so much of the literature on terrorism, *Invisible Martyrs* offers a fascinating and harrowing story. Of all the recent books on this topic, this one is an essential read.”

—**Brian Michael Jenkins, Senior Adviser, RAND Corporation**

“Qazi has given us a deeply personal yet acutely analytical journey into the minds of the women and girls who seek out violent extremism. *Invisible Martyrs* is an electrifying page-turner that should be read by everyone who wants to understand this disturbing phenomenon.”

—**John Horgan, senior counterterrorism adviser to the United States and Professor, Georgia State University**

“Qazi gives us a book that is bold, brave, and brilliant. A must-read for everyone trying to unpack violent extremism from a peaceful religion.”

—**Amanda Ohlke, Adult Education Director, International Spy Museum**

“*Invisible Martyrs* reflects Qazi’s personal spiritual journey as a Muslim American woman, mother, immigrant, and scholar trying to understand motives for terrorism that are so alien to her experiences with Islam. An antidote to complaints in the media that Muslims aren’t speaking up, the book demonstrates that many Muslim scholars continue to be doing their part to combat what the author characterizes as a ‘disturbing trend of an uncompromising Islamic scholarship spreading in the Muslim and Western world.’ Qazi also suggests alternative narratives against extremism, in which struggling ‘in the way of God’ means taking the path to love, not to war.”

—**Barbara Sude, former senior counterterrorism analyst, US government**

“Through storytelling, Qazi takes a deeper look at what motivates women and girls to join a dangerous and radical movement. This book is essential for anyone hoping to understand the dark truth of violent extremism as well as the beauty of Islam.”

—**Angelina Maldonado, world affairs instructor**

“Farhana Qazi has utilized a lifetime of studying Islam to craft a book that sheds light on a great mystery. She comes at the subject as a scholar and an American woman who spent time with Muslim women to understand their motivations. Her insights are unique. She draws on a tremendous amount of research and reflection. It is a valuable read to help understand what Islam really says and how we might prevent future violence.”

—**Vicky Collins, television producer and journalist**

“Compellingly written and hard to put down, Farhana Qazi’s first-person perspective asks difficult questions about faith and culture while shining a light on an often-unexpected and unseen side of radical Islam.”

—**Eric Tipton, author and screenwriter**

“With *Invisible Martyrs*, Farhana Qazi turns conventional thinking upside down and forces us to ask new questions about who engages in political violence and why. A highly original, compelling, and very readable exploration of a side of terrorism we know very little about.”

—**Peter Mandaville, Professor of International Affairs and Islamic Studies, George Mason University, and former Senior Adviser to Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry**

“In her book, Qazi fights violent extremists by trying to capture the true spirit of Islamic teachings while also understanding and offering solutions to vulnerable Muslims who need to reject such messages and once again embrace a religion of peace.”

—**Anne Speckhard, Director, International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, and Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Georgetown University School of Medicine**

“Farhana Qazi tells the fascinating inside story of the women who are ready to die for radical Islam.”

—**Deborah Scroggins, author of *Wanted Women***

“Heartbreaking. The balance Qazi brings to a difficult story—extremism versus the teachings of peace and love—makes for a powerful read. Telling the story through the eyes of women makes it memorable.”

—**Betsy Ashton, author and former President, Virginia Writers Club**

“With her inimitable insights, compelling analysis, and clear-eyed stories, Farhana Qazi makes a world opaque to most all of us accessible and vivid. This book has much for those willing to be taught and should be read widely.”

—**Eric Selbin, Chair of International Studies, Professor of Political Science, and Lucy King Brown Chair, Southwestern University**

“Gripping. Lyrical. With *Invisible Martyrs*, Qazi tells stories that need to be heard and penetrates minds that need to be understood.”

—**Ajit Maan, President, Narrative Strategies, and author of *Narrative Warfare***

“Qazi is a daring researcher who provides answers to why women and girls join extremism. With an open heart, she weaves in her own personal story to tell the world that ignorance of faith disempowers Muslim females. This is the only book by an American Muslim woman with a counterterrorism background that has the power to change hearts and minds.”

—**Judit Maull, Producer, Happy Madison Productions**

“Farhana Qazi’s courage and compassion inform this extraordinary book, which gives new and important insights into the radicalization of violent extremists. A beautifully crafted cri de coeur, *Invisible Martyrs* stands as crucial reading for all who share the author’s dedication to freedom, security, human rights, and human dignity.”

—**Abigail R. Esman, award-winning journalist, author, and member of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East**

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*Inside the Secret World
of Female Islamic Radicals*

Farhana Qazi



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Invisible Martyrs

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To my teachers

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“Whoever saves one life, saves all of humanity.”

—THE QURAN 5:32

“Those who are merciful will be shown mercy by the Most Merciful. Be merciful to those on the earth and the One above the heavens will have mercy upon you.”

—MUHAMMAD, the Prophet of Islam

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FOREWORD

Farhana Qazi is a gifted storyteller. Her ability to bring her readers into the heads and hearts of her subjects is remarkable. Once my favorite graduate student, she is now a treasured colleague with whom I have coauthored several articles, blending her cultural sensitivity with my focus on psychobiography, personality, and trauma. In all of our work together, the sum is greater than the parts.

In her work to make the motivations of terrorists, especially female terrorists, comprehensible, Farhana relies on her gifted interviewing skills. She manages to make the life stories of her subjects vital and compelling. There is but a small number of terrorism scholars who rely on sensitive interviews to make their subjects come alive. Thus Farhana's superb storytelling ability, as reflected in her fine book, *Invisible Martyrs*, helps shine a light that illuminates what makes terrorists tick and that emphasizes well the increasingly mainstream role of female terrorists.

Increasingly, as Farhana demonstrates, Muslim women are not merely playing a supportive role but are becoming active participants in terrorist attacks, a kind of equal employment opportunity among radical Muslim women. She recounts her lonely road as the first Muslim woman to work in the U.S. government's Counterterrorism Center. She describes her painful path in confronting her own Muslim faith, seeing that it was not only the warm and loving faith with which she had grown up—that the verses of the Quran could be used by radical Muslims to justify violence.

History is rapidly changing. The major terrorism scholar David Rapoport, in reviewing terrorist history, has identified four terrorist waves: the anarchist wave, the nationalist-separatist wave, the social-revolutionary wave, and the religious extremist wave. While we are still immersed in the religious extremist wave, there is now a wave so powerful that it merits being identified as the fifth wave: the social media wave.

Social media is increasingly associated with being radicalized online, and for women, the electronic medium can be very

attractive. It is also attractive to lone-wolf terrorists. No longer isolated and alone, they have access to the virtual community of hatred, and this is an extremely difficult counterterrorism challenge.

Farhana has found Islam through her counterterrorism work and believes that a pure and peaceful practice of the faith can help vulnerable women and girls say no to violent extremism. Her enduring belief in love, mercy, and tolerance is the guiding light for this memorable book.

Jerrold Post, MD, PhD
April 2018

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a true story. Everything in this book happened. Over the past few years, the vast majority of terrorist attacks happened on our television screens or the public places we go to. What we did not see in media reports is recorded in this book: the hundreds of women and their children who joined terrorist groups, as well as the hundreds more who dared to stand against terrorists to protect their families and communities. Women who speak up face numerous death threats. Therefore, some interviews are compressed, having taken place over multiple meetings. Some portions are not presented in the exact order of actual events. There are no composite characters; there are only sensitive sources and some people who wish to be unnamed and unknown to the public. Due to safety concerns, some names have been changed, and in some special cases (as clearly noted in the text), details of context were omitted. Ultimately, this is a personal story inside the dark world of terrorists and the survivors of war.

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PREFACE

My first day at the Counterterrorism Center began with a bombing. In October 2000, al-Qaeda killed seventeen American sailors and injured nearly forty when a small boat carrying explosives crashed into a US Navy destroyer, the USS *Cole*, in Yemen's Aden harbor. This was the deadliest attack against an American ship since 1987, when an Iraqi jet aircraft fired missiles at the USS *Stark*.

Men and women clad in business suits ran down the hallway. Everyone headed to the same large conference room. When the director, Cofer Black, entered, there was silence.

"We have been hit," he said.

We are at war with al-Qaeda—an enemy we don't understand.

In my mid-twenties, I was one of the youngest counterterrorism analysts and the first Muslim female to join the center. I knew I had much to learn. The daily dose of intelligence was mind-numbing. I memorized facts and details by keeping a dossier of terrorist attacks and tried to make my own predictions. Al-Qaeda attacked the World Trade Center in 1993. Would it do that again? In summer 1998, two US embassies in Africa were struck the same day. Could multipronged attacks signal a new tactic? In 2002, Wafa Idris became the first female Palestinian suicide bomber when she detonated a twenty-two-pound bomb in Jerusalem and killed more than one hundred people. Were women the new stealth bomb?

The bombing of the USS *Cole* proved that Muslim terrorists could take the world by surprise by conducting an attack in the most unpredictable place with an unimaginable tactic. Identifying radical men—and later women—who acted in the name of Islam forced me to reexamine my faith. Unfortunately, there was no one with whom I could discuss the tenets of Islam or radical Islam and make sense of intelligence reporting. I was the *first* American Muslim in the center, so I had to rely on my own knowledge of Islamic literature, history, and scripture to explain—or not explain—the use of violence by radicalized Muslims.