

Wives

of al-Qaeda leaders speak out

Two widows of Iraqi al-Qaeda leaders tell of life on the run, and how they face death sentences despite being kept in the dark

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THE GUARDIAN, BAGHDAD

The last Hasna Ali Yehye Hussain heard of her husband was a shattering explosion that hung heavy in the cold desert air of an Iraqi night. Covering in the sand 200m from her house, she had listened, terrified, as American and Iraqi commandos closed in on the home where, in the cellar, her husband had been hiding.

Abu Ayyub al-Masri — Egyptian warlord, al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq, and the man responsible for promoting three years of sectarian war — had known he was surrounded. Indeed he had prepared for what would happen should the Americans storm the gates.

The blast thundered through the house and over to the sand berm where Hussain and her children trembled. It signaled their father's end — blown to pieces by a suicide bomb.

He was not alone in that moment: killed with him was Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, himself an al-Qaeda leader.

No sooner had the blast subsided than Hussain, Baghdadi's wife, Wathi al-Jassem, and their children were swept away on helicopters to a world that has become more forbidding and foreign with each day.

Three months after that night Hussain is led to meet me in a secure building in the heart of Baghdad. Her husband's death had since been trumpeted by US Vice President Joe Biden as a crippling blow to al-Qaeda.

Hussain, 31, seemed lost but circumspect. "You are the first man I have willingly spoken to apart from my husband or father for the past seven years," she said, her uncovered face revealing thick round spectacles. The petite Yemeni had spent five years being shuttled from one safe house to another between summonses from her husband, with whom she had three children. She had raised them alone. They now share her prison cell in the Iraqi capital, but they will soon be made wards of a state that they do not belong to. Hussain's fate seems even more uncertain.

"I made no choices in my marriage," she said, tears welling. "I brought up my children in Tarmiyeh and Mosul [both cities caught in the Sunni insurgency]. Even when I was with him in the house, I was on the first floor and he was living in the cellar. I was not allowed to talk on the telephone, or to listen to music or watch TV. There was one TV in the house, but it was in a private room used only by my husband and his group."

She said she did not know her husband's allegiances. From early 2004, however, she had a sense that he was fighting the Americans. "We were in Fallujah then, and when the fighting started for the first time that year, I started to have doubts about my husband. After that, I thought he was probably involved in killing Americans," she added, suggesting she supported the notion of violent *jihād* against an occupying army.

"But when they told me [during interrogations last month] that he had been involved in killing innocent people, my son was screaming, saying: 'Mama, mama, listen to what they are saying about him, it's impossible.'"

She added: "I will lose my children soon — and for what? What have I done, and what have they done to live their life without a mother? All I want is to take them back to my father in Yemen and forget about Iraq. Yes, I have regrets. Of course I do."

Women are rarely jailed in Iraq; but when they are, there are few legal protections for them. There are 400 women jailed across the country. Those linked to terror offences have next to no

protection, and there seems little intent to distinguish the actions of wives from those of their husbands.

Baghdadi's wife, Jassem, 39, is held along with Hussain. Officials in the building readily confirm that both potentially face a death sentence after an investigative process.

Jassem said she had been aware her husband was no longer the pious poor man she had been forced to marry in Baghdad. "I knew he was the emir of the Islamic state of Iraq," she said warily. Her plump face was also uncovered as she outlined her life on the run and her inability to do otherwise. "I would have been killed if I had tried, and so would my children," she said. "The Americans, the Iraqi forces, al-Qaeda — all of them would have killed me if they could. Anyone who even thought about leaving this world would have been executed instantly."

"Women get executed even for complaining here."

By the end of 2006, she came to believe her husband had become central to the violence in Iraq, by then spiraling out of control.

"He was a taxi driver before then, and we lived all around Baghdad. But we moved to all the flash point areas, Fallujah, Haditha. For three and a half years it was a very hard life.

"He did not listen to anyone, including his wife. He did his own thing. All I did was raise children and prepare food. For nine months before the raid I did not even step outside the house."

Both Jassem and Hussain had lived among violent men in an atmosphere that cast as apostates deserving slaughter anyone who did not take the Koran as an incontrovertible and literal law book for life. They appeared to adhere to a strict version of Sunni Islam that avoided all Western trappings. There were, however, concessions to the modern world. "There was one television in the house and there was a computer," said Hussain. "But I was never allowed to see it, and the volume was always turned down for the introduction to the news bulletins [because of the risk of hearing un-Islamic music]."

Despite their humble beginnings, the two men rose through the ranks of the insurgency and assumed outright control for much of the violence in Iraq from mid-2006. After the al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan, they were the most hunted pair in the world. American investigators say evidence of direct links to Osama bin Laden and his deputy in south Asia were found on the house's computer hard drive.

Both widows insisted they were on the sidelines, kept out of sight of almost all visitors and only told what to prepare for meals. Iraqi investigators and judicial figures are attempting to take a harder line — interpreting their silence as complicity in a terrorist insurgency that still threatens the fragile state.

Both women have been appointed a lawyer, whom they have so far seen once each. For now, Hussain has her three children, Mohammed, Marian and Fatima, with her in her cell. They will soon be taken away.

"I just want to go back to Yemen now to see my family, but they say I could be here for 20 years," she said, weeping quietly. "If he really was a person that was killing innocent women and children, then of course I have big regrets. But my children, how can I live without them?"

Jassem seems more sanguine, more resigned to her fate. "I am Iraqi, I know what it's like here. Since I got married I have had a very hard life. All my life has been evasion and hardship. I'm tired. I'm sad about how my life has ended up, but for my husband I'm not sad at all."

