

FEATURES

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Umm Omar brandishes a gun at her house in Ramadi, capital of Iraq's western province of Anbar, on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Supporting a long blue dress and white headscarf, Umm Omar barely blinks as she whips out a pistol in her garden. For her, the gun is a necessary evil to protect her young family.

"I hate the sound of gunfire, but it is the terrorists who have forced me to learn to handle a gun to protect my children and my home," the 27-year-old mother of three says almost matter-of-factly, while deftly handling the weapon.

Umm Omar lives with her family in Ramadi, capital of the western province of Anbar, one of Iraq's most violent regions. She is among a growing number of young mothers who have learned to use a weapon to fend off insurgents targeting the families of civil servants and security personnel.

"A few months ago, a group of gunmen tried to burgle our home," notes husband Ahmed Karim, a police sergeant whose work frequently keeps him away from home for days at a stretch.

"I was not there, but my wife's screams alerted the neighbors," the 32-year-old adds, noting that the gang fled before completing their mission. "After that, I decided to teach her how to use a pistol."

Following the US-led invasion to oust Saddam Hussein in 2003, Anbar became the center of a vicious insurgency that was only put down after Sunni tribes and their militias sided with the US military against al-Qaeda.

Today, violence levels are dramatically lower in the province, where safety remains precarious despite major security improvements.

Many wives of civil servants, security personnel, elected provincial officials and journalists began arming themselves in June last year, when insurgents attacked the homes of notable residents or members of the police force.

In this largely desert province where the arid plain is interrupted by meadows and orchards on both banks of the Euphrates river, the foliage provides effective camouflage for gunmen, whose weapons of choice are handguns and the AK-47 assault rifle.

Women take up arms in Iraq's wild west

Despite conservative mores, police and religious leaders take a positive view of women who are determined to protect their homes

BY BASSEM AL-ANBARI

AFP, RAMADI, IRAQ

"As the wives of people responsible for maintaining security, we must protect our families when our men are protecting the country," says Ghada Ahmed, 24.

"It is they [the wives] who defend the home in the evenings when their husbands are away, or when they return tired from work," adds the robust mother of four, dressed in a colorful printed dress and pink Islamic headscarf.

"It was the continuous attacks that pushed us to react," she says, referring to the 10,000 soldiers and police officers killed since 2003 by insurrectionists who consider them "henchmen of the [American] occupiers."

In mid-June, a former member of the anti-al-Qaeda militia and five members of his family were killed in an armed night attack on his home close to Fallujah, another restive city in Anbar.

Paradoxically, in this religiously conservative region where women usually keep a low profile, the police and tribal chiefs, as well as religious dignitaries, take a positive view of women who are ready to defend themselves and their homes.

"This is an evolution toward modernity. We do not have any objection — quite the contrary," assures General Bahaa al-Qaisi, head of the provincial police force.

"It is necessary that they [women] help us because we do not have enough police officers to protect everyone," he adds about a province where a police force of 24,000 has to look after nearly 2 million inhabitants.

For Adnan Khamis, a leader of the al-Bualwan clan, the bravery of the women evokes memories of Islam's glorious past.

"Seeing women carry arms is [a sign of] great nobility," he says, adding that "women always took part in the wars alongside men and held their place in history."

Even religious leaders approve of this.

"For a woman, learning how to handle a weapon to protect her children and home is inscribed in Islamic law and mentioned in the words of the Prophet [Mohammed]," said an imam of Ramadi, who did not want to give his name.

Dutch clinic helps alcoholics by serving them beer

BY MARIETTE LE ROUX

AFP, AMERSFOORT, NETHERLANDS

Alcoholic Janetta van Bruggen settles comfortably into a clinic chair, lights a cigarette and takes a supervised swig from a tall, frosted mug — her sixth beer since breakfast.

Previously forced to drink on the sly, up to 2 liters of wine and 3 liters of beer per day, she is one of 19 clients of an innovative Dutch clinic where homeless alcoholics get booze in rations to keep them on a "light buzz."

"I will drink less from tomorrow," the 51-year-old says with a wink, stepping up to a make-shift bar counter where she pays a social worker US\$0.52 for 500ml of beer poured into a tall, frosted glass.

Behind the counter, a staff member makes a tick behind Van Bruggen's name on a register kept between the stack of beer cans in the fridge and a pail of soapy water for washing mugs.

Open since October, Centrum Maliebaan in the central Dutch city of Amersfoort allows its residents to drink up to 5 liters of beer on the premises every day, with an hour between each 500ml serving.

It goes through nearly 4,000 half-liter cans every month, bought at wholesale prices and sold with no mark-up.

"Our main goal is to stop binge drinking: It is better for the individual and for his environment," the center's psychiatrist Eugene Schouten said during a recent visit to the center, which he believes to be a first for Europe.

To achieve that, "we bind them with beer."

Based on a Canadian concept, the center targets the city's "very worst" alcoholics — those with no family, no work, no home and no desire to stop drinking, said Schouten.

"When alcoholics wake up in the morning, they feel sick. Then they drink until the feeling of sickness passes. Sometimes they drink a whole bottle of martini or port in a few seconds, before breakfast," said the center's team leader, Pieter Puijk.

"They get drunk and become a public annoyance: stealing, fighting, shouting. And binge drinking causes serious liver, brain and heart damage."

Residents of Maliebaan can order their first half-liter of beer from 7:30am, "just enough to make them feel OK." They then have to wait an hour for the next hit, with last rounds at 9:30pm.

"This allows us to keep the percentage of alcohol in their blood constant, creating a 'light buzz' effect," said Puijk.

"Their heads are clearer and we can work with them: We can get them to see a doctor, a psychiatrist, to eat, shower and to keep their behavior under control."

The center serves three meals a day, and hands out vitamins and medicine that suppresses withdrawal symptoms at night.

It gives clients access to a nurse and a doctor and helps them register for homeless and medical benefits.

For fun, they can play billiards or cards,



A client sits near her beer at the Centrum Maliebaan in Amersfoort on July 5. The center opened in October and allows its alcoholic residents to drink up to 5 liters of beer on the premises every day.

PHOTO: AFP

watch television or just sit around chatting over a mug of beer.

"The craving always remains. But by offering them activities, medication and food, it gets a bit milder," said Puijk.

"They have peace here. They are not hounded by the police or other citizens. There is nobody troubling them here, and they can enjoy the company of their peers."

"I feel safe," Maliebaan resident Marjan

Kryger, 45, said over a tall mug of beer.

"Here I can drink a beer in the morning without anyone laughing at me or calling me names."

"One shouldn't feel too at home here, or you'll never leave," added fellow-alcoholic Bob van Deuveren, 28, proclaiming he wants to cut back on drinking without quitting, "because I want a house and a kid."

The center houses 15 men and four women from their mid-20s to late-50s. They have all

been alcoholics for more than 10 years.

Maliebaan social worker Kees de Bruyn, 24, said he had difficulty with the concept initially.

"You have the idea that you should be helping these people to quit drinking," he said between beer orders.

"But people cannot be forced. And you can see the results: People drink less and less over time and they drink in a more structured manner, which causes their health to improve."

The center, largely sponsored by the Amersfoort municipality, cannot stop its residents drinking outside.

But Schouten said only about three or four are still topping up on a regular basis. "A consequence is that they won't be served beer if they arrive here drunk."

The center will soon offer its clients, now sleeping on camp cots in the common room, real beds in one- and two-person bedrooms.

Good behavior will be rewarded with extras like a bedside table or a desk.

"These will never be model citizens or hard-working taxpayers," Schouten said of his charges.

"But in this way they have more pleasure in life, they are less of a public nuisance and they are healthier."

"We try to give them a dignified existence," added Puijk. "They are just people, after all."

WARNING: Excessive consumption of alcohol can damage your health.