

Female Martyrdom: The Ultimate Embodiment of Islamic Existence?

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In January 2002, Wafa Idris, a young Palestinian woman from the al-Amri refugee camp adjacent to Ramallah, blew herself up on a crowded Jerusalem street. The Israel Defense Forces, Israeli public opinion, and many in the West were taken by surprise, if not outright astounded. Conversely, the Arab press, and to a greater degree the Islamic press, reacted with elated jubilation. "It's a woman!" cheered *al-Sha'ab*, an Islamic Egyptian newspaper, in a headline that played on an "It's a boy!" greeting card announcement for the felicitous birth of a son.¹ *Al-Ahram*, a leading Egyptian establishment newspaper, saw in Wafa with her dreamy eyes and the mysterious smile on her lips the likeness of Mona Lisa.² Some Islamic voices indeed took exception to the novelty, such as Sheikh Tantawi of al-Azhar in Cairo, or Hamas's Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, who faulted a woman leaving home improperly clad and unaccompanied by a male family member for breaching the boundaries of modesty. Ultimately, however, both relented and gave approval to such otherwise immoral conduct if the goal is as sublime as martyrdom.³

It was little wonder that the West was taken by surprise. Not only was the phenomenon of a Palestinian female suicide bomber practically unprecedented; it also departed from the universal feminine stereotype of women as gentler, softer, and certainly less prone to physical aggression than men. In a traditional Muslim society (and the majority of Muslim societies are traditional) women are perceived moreover as timid, modest, and sexually pure, all of which preclude free inter-gender mingling. Whether by free will or social pressure, they are mostly confined to the private realm, home, and family; to serving and satisfying their husbands' needs; and to childbirth and childrearing. They are thus associated with the myth of the gift of life rather than that of death. Moreover, not only are Muslim women marked stereotypically by those feminine traits – as are Western women to a great extent,

even in the days of the emerging Alpha Woman – but such traits and roles are also perceived as a social and religious commandment, which has been both internalized by women and harshly enforced by their social environment.

Thus, the chorus of responses to this watershed event, which no sooner became a phenomenon as more women followed in Wafa's footsteps, both as planners of attacks and as suicide bombers themselves, showed a marked tendency to cast it as an aberration. This phenomenon involved women ostensibly unable to marry or give birth, or who went astray and were bound to die in any event – in short, such as were marginalized by normative society. Typologies that emerged from research conducted in Israel on suicide bombers have highlighted the prototype of the exploited individual (with women figuring frequently among the ranks of the exploited), whereby deviations from society's behavioral norms are singled out as leading to suicide bombing.⁴ Miriam Cooke of Duke University, a prominent feminist researcher and activist for the emancipation of women in the Middle East, concluded that female martyrdom must be accounted for by a total despair of the Arab woman in the struggle to empower herself against the US, the old colonial forces, and her husband. Shibli Telhami of Maryland University and the Brookings Institute found evidence in the participation of women in suicide terrorism (prior to the participation of Hamas women) for the secularization of the phenomenon. In any event, suicide bombers, especially female, are portrayed as coming from an aberrant and marginal background.⁵

All this, however, is in the eye of the Western analyst. A largely different perspective emerges when the case is viewed from the other side, examined within the existential environment of these young women. Some of the points linking the female martyrdom phenomenon to the background of the women have also been cited in Israeli research, namely, that the foremost condition facilitating martyrdom is a favorable social environment and sympathetic media that disseminates favorable information within the supportive society.⁶ Societies as a rule will support a certain conduct when it is consonant with the relevant normative mindset and consciousness. This mindset, represented today by the principal spokespersons of Muslim societies, increasingly propounds an Islamic way of life that may be unassociated with political motives and is merely promoting piety and following the religious laws for daily conduct. Oftentimes, however, it is interwoven with support for the war effort, with the Palestinian dimension at the center joined by the campaign against those hostile to the interests of the Islamic nation. Within this atmosphere of destiny and a holy war, death gains an aura of inspired creativity, glorified in the context of expressions

such as “the art of death,” “the death industry,” “the death aspiration,” or “betrothal in death.” A culture of self-sacrifice is constructed with the martyrs as culture-heroes, the *shahid* and his family thus enjoying great prestige and admiration (not to speak of material reward) within both their immediate surroundings and broader circles informed by the media all over the Arab/Muslim world.⁷

The emergence of women martyrs caused no difficulty in the narrow Muslim social liberal circles, since the war effort is of supreme importance on their agenda, and men and women should in any case be equal participants. Nawal al-Sa’adawi, an anti-Islamist Egyptian pan-Arab activist and feminist, has supported female suicide bombers in the course of the current dispute over the definition of terrorism:

Israel and the West call resistance operations “terrorism.” . . . Are we to castigate those who fought with their own bare hands and died [doing so]? Are we to criticize a woman who loads herself up with explosives, blows herself up, and dies? Are we to castigate her for having blown herself up after having seen her father and her brothers killed? If I were in her place I would load myself up with dynamite and blow myself up. . . . How can I castigate the victim?⁸

More significantly, however, Islamic gatekeepers from various circles and countries (e.g., Sheikh Ali Abu al-Hassan, head of al-Azhar’s Religious Ruling Committee – “Fatwa Committee”; the Tabligh Movement; and the al-Qaeda mouthpiece) soon joined in supporting women martyrs under the religious ruling that all of Islam’s wars are just and holy wars.⁹ Evidence is brought forth from the Qur’an, which addresses men and women as one (33:35), and the legacy of the prophet, who said that if a Muslim country is attacked by an enemy, the obligation to wage war – the jihad – applies to each and every Muslim (*fardh ‘ayn* – an individual obligation, rather than *fardh kifayah* – a collective obligation). Accordingly, a person does not fulfill his/her duty through the actions of the Muslim collective, and a woman is obligated to go to war, even without permission from her husband. Further evidence and legitimization is drawn from the example of women in early Islamic history, such as ‘Aishah, wife of the prophet, who led tens of thousands in the Battle of the Camel; Safiyyah, his cousin, who killed and beheaded a Jew from the Qurayzah tribe; and several other daring brave women who took part in holy warfare.¹⁰

The phenomenon of Palestinian female suicide bombers is hence relatively new, somewhat problematic, and calls for special reasoning, but nevertheless widely accepted and endowed with legitimacy. Can this be taken as an indication of the penetration of Western values into Muslim society, and a step towards the

empowerment of women according to Western criteria, as stated with satisfaction by Western observers? If a woman can choose her death, can she henceforth also be free to choose the way she lives?¹¹

Further consideration of *al-Sha'ab*, the Islamist publication cheering under the headline "It's a woman," indicates otherwise. What was the jubilation about? Was it merely about a victory and reinforcement of the ranks, as might indeed be concluded from the newspaper's words: "It's a woman who taught you today a lesson in heroism, that taught you the meaning of jihad; it's a woman who wrote in letters of fire the war of a holy sacrifice, which struck fear into the heart of the enemy entity." Reading on, however, the cardinal message presents itself: "It's a woman who is showing you today, Muslim women, the meaning of true freedom, with which women's rights activists have tempted you... It's a woman who has now proved that the meaning of women's liberation is to free their body from this world's trials, and to accept death with a powerful brave embrace." An Egyptian sociologist linked with the Muslim Brotherhood expands on this theme (note the mirror image of Western views concerning marginality):

The West has already grasped that all the money it spends in order to distort the consciousness of the Muslim woman, and to make her think that her body and needs are the most important thing... is money wasted. Women mobilized by the West... are unable to influence women in any Arab country. All their talk about women's liberation, equality with men, and their right to libertine conduct, exposing their bodies, flaunting their feminine allure, and similar matters discussed at symposia funded by America and the West falls on deaf ears, except for a small marginal group of superficial women who have lost all hope.¹²

Even the establishment Jordanian newspaper *al-Dustur* echoes this line: "The Arab woman has taken her place and her dignity. It is the women's rights activists in the West who robbed women of their right to be human, and viewed them as bodies without souls. . . . Wafa Idris, like the rest of the young women of her generation . . . did not carry makeup in her suitcase, but enough explosives to fill the enemies with horror Wasn't it the West that kept demanding that the Eastern woman become equal to the man? Well, this is how we understand equality."¹³

Hence the approval and support extended to female suicide bombers is not merely blessing the enhanced war effort. The jubilation is about the confirmation of the path outlined for women by Muslim society, and the emergent proof that Muslim women reject consistent Western pressure that they be given Western-style freedom.

A demand of this sort is widely considered not only as despicable and corrupting, but moreover as an attack on the Islamic order – a Western imperialist assault on the Muslim mind and its value system.¹⁴ The majority of female Muslim activists are aware of the prevalent aversion in society to Western feminism and are even party to this aversion, and therefore maintain that the way to improve women's status within society and the family is within the dominant normative order. This is done by introducing into Muslim annals the "Her Story"¹⁵ – history viewed through the role of women, thus magnifying that role; and through an alternative interpretation of the canonical sources and biographies of Muslim women, a method notably pursued by Fatima Mernissi, an activist feminist professor of sociology from Morocco.¹⁶ Following a similar strategy, Islamist female activists exhibit in the conduct of their daily life both a principled rejection of Western values and the internalization of their role as guardians of Muslim authenticity.¹⁷ What Muslim women say by embracing the existing order is: we don't want to – or cannot – adopt your way. We have our own way that is superior as well as effective, based on rational causality that derives from our basic principles and is accepted by society.

Their strategy has proven effective. Accepting the injunctions of Islam, whether in theory or in practice – such as adopting the hijab, the new version of Islamic dress – lifts the ban on female visibility in non-familial male society, frees women of their exclusive assignation to the private sphere, and affords them a foothold, freedom of movement and activity, and even authority in the public sphere, though short of the ultimate top position in government. Indeed, the more groups and organizations are closer to Islam, the more they encourage their women to participate in public activities.¹⁸ Their dissent from the Western version of libertine feminism, which in addition to subverting morals positions women against men, mitigates the threat it poses both to the aspiration for cosmic purity that hinges on female conduct as well as to the patriarchal order in the family (even if this is not explicitly stated), and to the Muslim conception of the harmonious society composed of mutually complementing camps, male and female.

However, Muslim public discourse does not stop at ousting the West from its position as a benchmark for universal values. That would merely constitute parochial disavowal and limiting the validity of Western values to the realm of the Western world as a product of the specific course of Western history, falling short of its essential refutation. It would mean that it is right for them, but not for us – but not constitute a fundamental denial. Islamic spokesmen have previously attempted to refute the Western viewpoint but mostly in connection with its secularism,

claiming that it makes the entire world order dependent on man, who is fickle and ephemeral.¹⁹ Increasingly however, whether as a reaction to the Western “assault” or the confidence gained by subaltern cultures in the time of multiculturalism, Muslim (not necessarily Islamic) discourse now pushes further, and tries to debunk Western liberalism and its claims concerning Muslim women, not merely through the use of the limited parochial rationalization of Islam, but also on the home court of Western discourse, using the latter’s own tools. This method poses a more defying challenge to a broader public, including the Western world.

A model example of this trend is Saba Mahmood, an Egyptian-born Muslim feminist, anthropologist, and scholar of religious movements, well-regarded and highly active in the top level of Western academe (Princeton, Chicago, and Cambridge). Mahmood challenges Western liberalism on the whole,²⁰ asserting that it is a mistake to assume that human agency (a sociological term connoting the ability of autonomous human action to achieve self-fulfillment – a cornerstone of the definition of freedom in Western liberal philosophy) necessarily means an internal personal and natural aspiration of an individual for freedom and quasi-Promethean self-construction. It is a mistake to assume that human agency is the drive to rise up against authority and, as far as women are concerned, defy the structures of male control.

This mistaken assumption triggers deprecatory reactions by feminists across the political spectrum regarding the support and participation of women in the Islamic movements. A common allegation is that these women are held captive in a widespread patriarchal plan, and that if they were released from their shackles, they would naturally express their instinctive abhorrence of the traditional Islamic practices by which they are bound, particularly at a time in which the opportunities for freedom are so great. The fact is, according to Mahmood, that at the heart of Muslim women’s conduct lies the principle of *sabr* – the well-known concept of patience. Thus accepting polygamy, for example, is not considered by pious Muslim women as submission to injustice, but rather a demonstration of the virtue of *sabr*. Even more conspicuous is the issue of the hijab. Many studies, including those by Muslim feminists, define the desire to wear it according to the researchers’ own criteria, hence reaching the conclusion that the motive is social protest, economic need, alienation, or utilitarian strategy. The reasons cited by most veiled women – morality, religion, and values – are dismissed as the imageries of oppressed people.

Wrong, says Mahmood. These responses are based on the assumption that in order for an individual to be free, her actions must be the consequence of her own

will, not of customs, tradition, or plain enforcement. However, she argues, it is logical to assume as well that it is possible that the autonomous will of an individual and its self-realization are directed towards non-liberal goals that are consistent with customs and tradition. It is likewise logical to assume that it is possible that an active and autonomous human agency aspires not necessarily to progressive goals of change and rebellion against social conventions, such as wearing jeans and dying one's hair blue, but to finding purpose, value, and pride in an effort to preserve tradition and stability and embody them in the appropriate way of life.

The liberal view regards this as the internalization by women of their (oppressive) socialization. It is possible, however, to regard it as an active will to adopt the standards set for women by divine commandment, and make them their own through both external behavior and the construction of a coherent spiritual stance that is entrenched and integral to the point where women feel true discomfort when values relevant to women are not applied. This discomfort applies not only to the conduct of the individual herself, but also to the behavior of the surrounding society, behavior that reduces the meaning of Islam to an abstract system of beliefs that does not directly affect the daily life of the individual – how to dress, how to speak, which hobbies are proper, how to invest money, and what form public discourse should take. It can be a process of a conscious effort to reorient aspirations by creating harmony between internal motives, external actions, tendencies, and emotional states through repeated practice of moral deeds.

Furthermore, drawing on Michel Foucault, Mahmood argues that power should not be understood merely according to the simplistic binary model of domination/submission. The ability to act is created and made possible by given relationships of submission that are not necessarily passive. It is composed of struggle, effort, and achievements. Power in this sense is the way in which someone carries out acts on his/her thought, body, behavior, and modes of existence in order to achieve a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, soundness, or eternal life. According to this definition, resisting a relationship of domination is only one form of appropriating an active human agency; forms of accepting domination and hierarchy may also achieve such a state. The Muslim piety movement, researched by Mahmood in Egypt, assumes the existence of a divine plan for human life, as expressed in the Qur'an, its exegeses, the model of the prophet and his companions, and the moral laws derived from them, and every individual must strive, with no legal or other compulsion, to realize this plan. In a context in which there is no separating line between the aspirations of the individual and the conduct enjoined by society, submission to certain forms

of external authority is a necessary condition for realizing an individual's potential, i.e., constituting an active human agency.

Mahmood furthermore suggests that the formative role of the social context of the individual should be considered in a major way. The individual and her conduct are themselves a product of sanctioned traditions that far exceed in their logic and power the consciousness of the individual formed by them. It is not possible to identify a universal range of a human activity – such as “resistance” – outside the framework of the ethical and political conditions where such activities gain their particular meaning.

Mahmood's argument does not directly address the phenomenon of female suicide bombers, but neither does it restrict its conclusions to the researched group of the Egyptian Piety movement and may be applied to the issue at hand and offer an additional angle for analysis. First, in Palestinian society, as in Arab/Muslim society in general, religious devotion is an organizing norm for the ideals the society uplifts. The ideal of women's status and proper conduct, especially when intertwined with a strong national sentiment and intense mobilization to glorified warfare for a concrete and immediate goal, situates female martyrs in the center of the social consensus, rather than the margins. Second, the aspiration for the embodiment of the Islamic ideal of existence that emerges in Mahmood's research may be applied as well to the Palestinian martyrs, who perform the ultimate embodiment – the sacrifice of their body. The plausibility of their act as an autonomous choice for self-realization through acceptance of the prevalent norms in their society, and perhaps most importantly the formation of their autonomous consciousness by their society, further situates them in a consensual position, rather than in one motivated by aberrancy.

The Western liberal view may find it difficult to accept Mahmood's claim concerning its own relativity and the partial role of its secular morality and rationalism in containing the modes of worthy human creativity, even when it relies on Western philosophers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Foucault, and a number of the most prominent Western feminists.²¹ This liberal view, however, should take notice of this trend as a demonstration of the firm tendency in Muslim discourse to reject Western views on women's liberation, as well as other liberal Western views – such as democratization – and the ensuing Western demands and pressures for social and political change. It should also take notice of the fact that this rejection is intensifying and becoming more self-confident, no longer challenging out of the periphery of Muslim orthodoxy, using Islamic parochial rationale, but rather in the heart of the Western public sphere, using what the West considers to be universal terms.

Western researchers may find it easier to accept the claim made by subaltern cultures as well as by certain Western researchers, specifically anthropologists,²² that in order to observe in an informed way the conduct of the “other,” even if “lacking” according to their Western judgment, one must relate to the formative surroundings of the individual as a major factor in understanding her conduct. Furthermore they may not find it difficult to agree that if the individual in question were formed by her surrounding culture, it would include what she may consider as her autonomous choice. The ability of Western researchers to observe traditions that are different from their own from within those “other” traditions, while putting aside their own entrenched traditions and logic, may be an important contribution to a better understanding of action and political processes in those cultures.

Notes

- 1 *Al-Sha'ab*, February 1, 2002, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 84, February 13, 2002.
- 2 *Al-Ahram*, February 10, 2002, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 85, February 14, 2002.
- 3 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 2, 2002.
- 4 See Anat Berko, *The Path to the Garden of Eden* (Tel Aviv: Mishcal, 2004) [Hebrew] and Shaul Kimhi and Shmuel Even, *Who are the Palestinian Suicide Bombers?* JCSS Memorandum no. 73, Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2004 [Hebrew]. In addition to the examples of the particular women brought there, women can be viewed under the prototype of the exploited individual, the second of the four typologies in the latter study.
- 5 Arts @ Sciences and Trinity College News, June 30, 2003, www.aas.duke.edu/news/faculty/cooke.php; and Libby Copeland, “Female Suicide Bombers: The New Factor in the Mideast’s Deadly Equation,” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2002.
- 6 Kimhi and Even; and Reuven Paz, “Suicide and Jihad in Radical Palestinian Islam: The Conceptual Side,” Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, August 1998.
- 7 Barbara Victor, “Equality in Death,” *The Observer*, April 25, 2004; Paz, “Suicide and Jihad in Radical Palestinian Islam,” and Special Information Bulletin, C.S.S., March 2004; *Palestinian Media Watch Bulletin*, July 10, 2005; *al-Ayyam*, August 25, 2005, quoted in al-Jazeera special on female suicide bomber Hanadi Jaradat, MEMRI, *Special Dispatch Series* no. 966, August 22, 2005; *Palestinian Media Watch Bulletin*, August 22, 2005. Cf. also Kevin Toolis: “Why Women Turn to Suicide Bombing,” *The Observer*, October 12, 2003; Avishai Margalit, “The Suicide Bombers,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 16, 2003; Joyce Davis, “Women Suicide Bombers – Equality in Terror?” *The Globalist*, October 21, 2004;

- Inigo Gilmore, "Palestinian Women Volunteer to be Martyrs: After the death of first suicide bomber, dozens of women are signing up for military operations against Israel," *The Sunday Telegraph*, February 4, 2002; www.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document; Itamar Marcus, "Encouraging Women Terrorists," *Palestinian Media Watch Bulletin*, March 12, 2002.
- 8 *Kul al-'Arab*, December 24, 2004, in MEMRI, *Special Dispatch Series* no. 876, March 10, 2005.
 - 9 In the religious ruling by Sheikh Abu al-Hassan, head of al-Azhar's Religious Ruling Committee, and as rationalized by 'Itaf 'Alayan, who was apprehended before she completed her mission, *al Sharq al-Awsat*, February 2, 2002, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 83, February 12, 2002. See also *al-Khansa'a*, quoted in "Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center," August 2004, and in MEMRI, *Special Dispatch Series* no. 779, September 7, 2004; and Barbara Metcalf, "Islam and Women: The Case of the Tablighi Jamaat," *SEHR* 5, no. 1 *Contested Politics*, February 27, 1996, www.stanford.edu. 'Abdallah 'Azzam, "Defence of Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Imam," *Religioscope*, www.religion.info; the ruling on jihad for women, "Islam Question and Answers," n.d. www.islam-qa.com.
 - 10 See also for example in Afaq 'Arabiyyah, January 30, 2002, in *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, January 31, 2002, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 83, February 12, 2002; and "Courage of Muslim Women," n.d., www.inter-islam.org.
 - 11 Laura Ann Trombley, "Female Suicide Bombers: The Newest Trend in Terrorism," May 8, 2002, <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefer/joe/tromb1.html>; Barbara Victor, "Equality in Death," *The Observer*, April 25, 2004; and Copeland, "Female Suicide Bombers."
 - 12 *Afaq 'Arabiyyah*, in *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 84, February 13, 2002.
 - 13 *Al-Dustur*, February 5, 2002, quoted in MEMRI, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 84, February 13, 2002.
 - 14 Ayatollah Khomeini, quoted in D. Brumberg, "Islamic Rule and Islamic Social Justice," in R. S. Appleby (ed.), *Spokesmen for the Despised: Fundamentalist Leaders of the Middle East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 41. For an expanded discussion on the assault of the mind, see Rivka Yadlin, *An Arrogant Oppressive Spirit: Anti-Zionism as Anti-Judaism in Egypt* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1988).
 - 15 Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (California: University of California Press, 1996); and Evelyn Early, *Baladi Women of Cairo: Playing With an Egg and a Stone* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1993).
 - 16 Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Afshar Haleh, *Islam and Feminism: An Iranian Case Study* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).
 - 17 For more on this subject, see Rivka Yadlin, "Women and Islamic Fundamentalism:

- Suppression or Channel for Political Activism?" in Ofra Bengio, ed., *Women in the Middle East: Between Tradition and Change*, Survey 134, Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies [Hebrew].
- 18 Metcalf, "Islam and Women: The Case of the Tablighi Jamaat."
- 19 Cf. S. H. Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: Kegan Paul, 1990), p. 108.
- 20 The discussion of Mahmood's ideas is taken from: Saba Mahmood, *Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival*, *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001):202-26; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), chapter 1; S. Mahmood, "Questioning Liberalism, Too," *Boston Review*, April-May 2003; S. Mahmood and C. Hirschkind, "Feminism, the Taliban and the Politics of Counterinsurgency," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 339-54.
- 21 Cf. Kay S. Hymowitz, "Why Feminism is AWOL on Islam," *SF Independent Media*, January 15, 2003.
- 22 Cf. B. Parekh, "The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy," in David Held (ed.), *Prospects for Democracy: North, South, East, West* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 167-71; John Keane, Professor of Politics at the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Westminster University, in an interview with *al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 411, January 3-7, 1999, broadcast on MSA News, January 11, 1999; and Brian Katulis, "The Impact of Public Attitudes," in *Freedom House Report: Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*, May 2005.