

Failed Suicide Bomber Turns on al Qaeda

1:40 PM EDT, September 14, 2007

Ahmad al Shayea survived his truck bomb attack, but not without scarring to his face and hands.

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Ahmad al Shayea is the rarest of truck bombers — he survived his suicide mission in Iraq even though the blast from his bomb was strong enough to kill 12 bystanders.

Al Shayea, who was disfigured during the attack, claims al Qaeda tricked him into becoming a bomber by asking him to deliver a tanker truck, which they had rigged with a bomb.

“They told me to take it to an address in Baghdad. As soon as I got there the truck exploded,” said the native of Saudi Arabia. **He survived by jumping out of the truck.**

Al Shayea renounced terrorism and returned to Saudi Arabia, where he works to convince would-be insurgents and terrorists to give up their deadly ways.

“I think God took me out of death to show others what can happen,” he told CNN. “If you join al Qaeda, they will use you, and maybe you will die.”

Burned and bandaged, Shayea was captured and paraded on Iraqi TV in 2004.

Al Qaeda propaganda videos glorify so-called foreign fighters in Iraq like al Shayea. It has recruited them from countries all across the Middle East.

Some Iraqi officials say more Saudis than any other nationality have responded to al Qaeda’s call. Saudi officials and the U.S. military deny that claim. But Saudi sources do admit that more than 800 young Saudis have gone to Iraq to fight. That’s far more than the Saudi government has acknowledged until now.

Since 9/11, when 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis, the oil rich kingdom has been accused of spreading radicalism. It’s a claim that stings this longtime U.S. ally, which also finds itself in al Qaeda’s cross hairs.

So now, Saudi officials say they are escalating their fight against homegrown al Qaeda militants. **Former insurgents and terrorists like al Shayea are their chief weapon in the battle for the hearts and minds of young Saudis.**

He now works with the Saudi Arabian government to dissuade young Saudis from joining al Qaeda.

“The reality behind it is the religious misunderstanding of Islam, so we have to correct the ideas,” said Dr. Mansour al Turki, a psychologist.

Al Shayea and hundreds of other Saudis who were aligned with terrorists are being re-educated in prisons and rehabilitation centers. They are taught that al Qaeda’s emphasis on a violent approach to Islam is wrong.

The program offers early release from prison. It’s available only to captured jihadis who demonstrate a willingness to change over the course of repeated interviews with specialists. Al Shayea said he was questioned by security forces, then clerics, then psychologists.

“They looked at my mood, listened to me. They were nice,” he adds.

Al Turki said the review is thorough.

“We make sure he understands dialogue. We make sure he is not just lying. So it is not an easy job I can assure you,” he said.

The Saudi government says more than 1,000 former al Qaeda recruits have been through the program. Seven hundred of them are now free. Critics, mainly from the country’s security forces, fear mistakes could allow some al Qaeda fighters back on the street.

A native of Saudi Arabia, al Shayea was just 19 when he went to Iraq to fight for al Qaeda against American forces. **He was angered**, he said, by scenes of U.S. troops killings his fellow Muslims.

“I went to Iraq with Saudi men because jihad is a duty for every Muslim,” he said. “I went to Iraq to fight the jihad and kill Americans.”

He was hoping to take up arms against Americans, but said he never envisioned himself as a suicide bomber. After his truck bomb exploded, al Shayea was captured and paraded on Iraqi TV. Burned and bandaged, he was blamed for the death of 12 bystanders. He confessed.

Iraqi security officials deported him to Saudi Arabia. Today, with the backing of the Saudi government, al Shayea gets his anti-al Qaeda message out on fliers that include pictures of him before and after his bombing. He has become the anti-Al Qaeda example.

“I learned my lesson, and others will learn as well,” he said.



In Iraq



In Saudi Arabia