

## **Manufacturing Human Bombs: Strategy, Culture, and Conflict in the Making of Palestinian Suicide Terrorism**

How could human beings strap explosives around their bodies, walk into crowded public spaces, and blow themselves up with the intent of killing men, women and children? Why do organizations adopt suicide terrorism as a tactic in their struggle against opponents? Why do some societies venerate suicidal terrorists and accept them as heroes?

The phenomenon of suicide terrorism is a complex one that cannot be explained by one overarching motivation. To understand suicide terrorism, we must tackle the problem at three levels of analysis: individual motivations, organizational objectives, and societal conflicts. I argue that at each level of analysis there are different variables at work that explain why individuals, organizations, and societies embrace this form of extreme violence.

At the level of the individual, religious frameworks promoted by militant organizations create cultural inducements to take a leap toward a “heroic” end. Suicide bombers are not significantly different from other rebels around the world who are willing to engage in high-risk activism out of a sense of duty and obligation to their families, comrades, communities, and God. Terror groups frame suicide attacks as acts of unparalleled heroism, religious obligation, and opportunities for personal redemption. In doing so, they foster a culture of martyrdom that generates future volunteers for suicide attacks.

At the level of organizations, strategic calculations in the context of asymmetric warfare favor innovative tactics that surprise opponents and circumvent the enemy’s stronger capabilities. Human bombs are smart bombs that are versatile, accurate, and extremely lethal. They are also relatively inexpensive and easy to organize, and their psychological impact on the enemy is potent. Organizations facing powerful foes cannot engage in conventional attacks and expect to win; they must be creative and substitute tactics in order to throw off their adversaries and seek gains disproportionate to the terror group’s actual power. Suicide terrorism provides such strategic advantages.

At the level of society, suicidal violence is embraced and venerated when three conditions are met: (1) prevailing cultural norms and mores encompass belief systems, symbolic narratives, and historical traditions that justify and celebrate martyrdom; (2) legitimate authorities promote or acquiesce to extreme violence; and (3) groups or communities feel overwhelming threats and victimized by external enemies in the course of political conflict. High

rates of volunteerism for suicide terrorism are not possible without societal support, and the latter is not possible without the intersection of the three aforementioned conditions.

This theory of suicide terrorism has been developed inductively through my research on Palestinian suicidal violence during the *al-Aqsa intifada* (uprising) that began in September 2000, reached its peak in March 2002, and has just entered its fifth year in late 2004. Although this theory may be unique to the Palestinian case, I suspect that it has broader applications to other conflicts including Sri Lanka, Chechnya, and, more recently, Iraq.

### **The Puzzle of Palestinian Suicide Bombings**

Suicide bombings have emerged as a prevailing tactic among Palestinian militants fighting against Israel. This tactic has received popular support among Palestinians as evinced by a number of public opinion polls.<sup>1</sup> More ominously, a culture of martyrdom has developed around suicide bombers, characterized by the veneration of “martyrs” through posters, mass funerals, and even the naming of babies and public streets after them.<sup>2</sup>

Suicide bombings are not a new tactic in the Palestinian context. As early as 1993, Palestinian militants have used suicide bombings in their struggle against Israel. However, suicide bombings since 2000 have taken on a new character both quantitatively and qualitatively. Previously, this form of violence was sparingly used by militants, usually to derail the peace process or as a response to the assassination of its top commanders. From September 1993 to September 2000, there were 28 suicide bombings, an average of four bombings a year. In the current cycle of violence, suicide bombings have been used monthly, weekly, and sometimes daily. From October 2000 to April 2004, there were approximately 118 suicide attacks – an average of more than 29 attacks per year. Many more attacks were foiled by Israel forces.

Suicide bombings since 2000 have changed in qualitative ways. Previously, suicide bombings were the domain of Islamic militants belonging to Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Since 2000, this mode of violence has been adopted by secular factions such as the semi-Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and a splinter Fatah faction known as Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, whereas previously men were the only ones to conduct suicide bombings, in recent years women have taken up the explosive belt.<sup>4</sup> Finally, whereas previously suicide bombings involved a relatively long cycle of recruitment, indoctrination, and

training, in recent times suicide bombings have been carried out with no more than a week of preparation as the number of volunteers for suicide attacks has expanded over the past four years.

Observers of the second Palestinian *intifada* often comment that suicide bombers do not lend themselves to easy generalizations. Other than being Muslim, usually unmarried, and in their late teens or early twenties, not much more is common among the bombers. Some bombers come from modest or impoverished backgrounds, while many others come from middle class or even affluent families. Some bombers lack secondary education while others are university students and graduates with degrees ranging from engineering, computer programming, journalism, and Islamic law. Some have been engaged in militancy since the first Palestinian uprising, while others are recent recruits who joined the movement explicitly for the purpose of carrying out a suicide mission.<sup>5</sup> The lack of common patterns in the profile of suicide bombers suggests that a parsimonious explanation of this phenomenon is not possible.

### **Why Do They Do It?**

Suicidal violence on the scale witnessed in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict involves at least three actors: organizations that are willing to recruit, train, and dispatch suicide bombers; individuals that are willing to serve as human bombs; and societies that legitimate and venerate “martyrdom operations.”

### ***Why Do Organizations Promote Suicide Bombings? Strategic Logic of Terror Groups***

Suicide terrorism requires organizational tasks that include acquiring intelligence on potential targets, recruitment and preparation of potential bombers, engineering explosives for suicide attacks, and issuing propaganda to promote organizational ideology, gain public support, and set the stage for future recruitment of militants. What this tells us is that organizations that adopt suicide terror require a sophisticated infrastructure, financial and material resources, and commitment at various levels of organizational membership and leadership. Without this organizational infrastructure and commitment, suicide terrorism will be limited to few isolated episodes. It also tells us that suicide terrorism is not a whimsical choice adopted by one leader – no matter how charismatic or influential – irrespective of what other members think.

Suicide terrorism is a strategic choice based on cost-benefit calculations by weak groups with limited resources seeking to wage war against formidable opponents. Under conditions of

asymmetrical power, disadvantaged groups seek to protect their meager financial, material, and human resources, and place a premium on secrecy and organizational maintenance. Therefore, militant groups utilize forms of indirect warfare to inflict damage on their opponents without exposing their organizations to undue loss of resources. Thus, what appears to be an irrational or highly emotive form of violence is, in actuality, an effective method of asymmetrical warfare.

In the case of Palestinian suicide bombers, radical groups stand little chance of victory if they take on directly the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). The latter is better trained and equipped, and can endure material losses due to the resources it commands. The Palestinian factions, on the other hand, lack sophisticated weaponry and have lost many lives through conventional hit-and-run operations without inflicting harm on the IDF. Accordingly, they switched to “softer” – i.e. civilian – targets that can terrorize Israelis, weaken their economy, and drive settlers away from the occupied territories. Suicide bombers, it is said, help create a “balance of terror” by inflicting larger casualties with fewer “martyrs.”<sup>6</sup> For example, Muhammad Nazzal, member of Hamas’ Political Bureau abroad, argued that military operations within the occupied territories resulted on average in one Israeli death for every 12 Palestinians killed. In contrast, operations within Israel’s 1948 borders resulted in nine Israeli deaths for every Palestinian suicide bomber.<sup>7</sup>

Suicide bombers are also relatively less expensive to recruit and prepare than guerrilla fighters who must be armed and sheltered over an extended period of time. Suicide bombers conduct their missions with greater versatility and accuracy, making them into the smartest bombs ever manufactured. Psychologically, their impact on the enemy is potent because suicide attacks imply that the attackers are dedicated and resolute people who are not deterred by the threat of death.

In conversations with supporters of Hamas in the West Bank, they were explicit about the strategic effectiveness of “martyrdom operations” as a war of attrition that could bleed the Israeli economy, drive away new immigrants from Israel, and create generalized insecurity at the heart of Israeli towns and cities. I was told repeatedly that Palestinians lacked sophisticated weaponry such as laser-guided missiles, fortified tanks, and Apache helicopters, so suicide bombers provide an equalizing weapon and create a “balance of terror.” Moreover, I was told that the Israelis love life, which is their principal weakness, and that is why suicide bombers can strike fear in them. They cannot imagine that people are willing to sacrifice themselves for a cause. For secular groups, suicide terrorism was adopted, at least in part, to compete with their Islamic

rivals in the factional struggle over public support. One of the militants of Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a group that adopted suicide terrorism for the first time in January 2002 (more than one year after Hamas and Islamic Jihad perfected the tactic), termed this development as “healthy competition” in the same way that European football (soccer) teams compete with each other by constantly striving to be creative in their strategies.<sup>8</sup>

Strategic considerations in the context of asymmetrical warfare help explain why organizations adopt this form of extreme violence. However, strategy alone cannot explain the decision of individuals to accept the role of martyrs, especially when these individuals will not live to enjoy the fruits of their struggle? In other words, strategy may explain the recruiter’s logic in the selection of suicidal tactics, but not the rationality of the bombers themselves. To probe the motivations of individual bombers, we need to look beyond strategic calculations and into the realm of cultural frameworks and religious appeals.

### ***Why Do Individuals Become Suicide Bombers? Redemptive Logic of Suicide Bombers***

People do not engage in violence merely in response to bent up anger, frustration, or a sense of deprivation. Nor do they sacrifice themselves on the basis of rational calculations of the costs and benefits of different courses of action – e.g. comparing the travails of this world with the rewards of the afterlife. Research shows that high-risk activism and extreme violence that disrupts normal living and brings tremendous hardship to militants must be “framed” – or rationalized – as meaningful acts of redemption. Violence must not only be portrayed as the only means to achieve desired ends, it must also be legitimated as fulfilling a duty to one’s own values, family, friends, community, or religion. Failure to act, consequently, is perceived as a betrayal of one’s ideals, friends, country, God, or sense of manhood.

In the case of Palestinian suicide bombers, militant organizations have retrieved Islamic texts and symbols concerning *jihad* and martyrdom to justify and motivate suicidal operations. The communiqués of militant organizations are replete with *Qur’anic* verses that urge Muslims not to fear martyrdom and *jihad* in the path of God. Suicide bombers are often videotaped before an operation imploring their brothers to abandon their commitment to this ephemeral world and seek the eternal afterlife – the real goal of true Muslims – through self-sacrifice.

Proponents of suicide bombings create posters, web sites, and public exhibits to honor their “martyrs” and publicize their “heroic” sacrifice. At al-Najah University in Nablus, a place

that has produced many suicide bombers, I saw many posters and murals for “martyrs” exhibited on nearly every wall and entrance. Suicide bombers and their organizers also celebrate, rather than mourn, the death of the “martyrs” after a suicidal mission to rejoice their entry into heaven. The symbolism is that of transcendence to a better world, which is the goal of every devout Muslim. Hamed Abu Hejleh, a suicide bomber who blew himself up at bus stop in Netanya in January 2001, injuring 60 Israelis, and whose oversized picture was mounted in one of the main staircases at al-Najah University when I visited it in December 2003, wrote in his last will and testament: “My last wish to you my family is that none of you should weep in my procession to heaven. Indeed, distribute dates and ululate in the wedding of martyrdom.” The mother of Muhammad Fathi Farhat, who was video taped with her son prior to his operation wishing him success in his deadly mission, was also video taped distributing sweets to neighbors who came to “celebrate” and shouting at those who would cry to leave because she will not accept tears on this joyous occasion.<sup>9</sup> These practices idealize the act of martyrdom and elevate its underlying values in the eyes of potential recruits to inspire future missions. Religious framing imbue acts of extreme violence with meaning, purpose, and morality. It transforms cruel terror into sacred missions in the mind of terrorists and their sympathetic observers. In short, they create a culture of martyrdom where none existed previously.<sup>10</sup>

In reading the statements of many suicide bombers and after speaking to supporters of the Islamic Bloc ( Hamas ) at al-Najah University in Nablus and Beir Ziet Univeristy in Ramallah (both in West Bank), I was struck by three consistent themes. The first was the insistence of suicide bombers and their supporters that “martyrdom operations” are necessary to fulfill one’s commitment to God and the Prophet Muhammad who urged Muslims to fight persecution and not fear death. Suicide bombings are portrayed not as a strategic tool or innovative tactic that is better than all the other strategies and tactics. Little time or effort is dedicated in the last will and testaments of the bombers to prove that suicide attacks are better than conventional methods of rebellion. Instead, their comments are almost exclusively focused on the religious imperative to engage in *jihad* and the need to embrace martyrdom to achieve liberation, end injustice, seek vengeance, or fulfill one’s duty to country and God. Ismail al-M’asoubi, a suicide bomber that killed two Israelis and injured one in Gaza on June 22, 2001, wrote in his last will and testament: “Love for *jihad* and martyrdom has come to possess my life, my being, my feelings, my heart, and my senses. My heart ached when I heard the *Qur’anic* verses, and my soul was torn when I

realized my shortcomings and the shortcomings of Muslims toward fulfilling their duty of fighting in the path of God almighty.” Mahmoud Sleyman Abu Hasanein, who was bent on achieving martyrdom and sought after his wish in March 2002, wrote to his father: “Dear Father: If I do not defend my religion, my land and holy sites, and another person does not, and another, then who will liberate the land and the holy places.” He concludes his last will and testament with words directed toward the entire Arab and Muslim nations of the world: “Why are you committed to this transient world? Why the fear? We only die once, so let it be for the sake of God.”

The second theme that emerges from the discourse of suicide bombers and their supporters is the redemptive act of martyrdom. Suicide bombings are not only an opportunity to punish an enemy and fulfill God’s command to fight injustice, it is also a privilege and a reward to those most committed to their faith and their values. To be selected for “martyrdom operations” is akin to receiving a stamp of approval or a certificate of accomplishment from one’s peers. It is a form of endorsement of one’s moral character and dedication. This approval is important because it makes retreat in the face of fear during a suicide operation unthinkable. I am amazed at how many bombers refer to their missions euphemistically as “a test” or a challenge to prove their courage and manhood. Fouad Ismail Muhammad al-Houwarni, who blew himself up on March 9, 2002, killing 11 and injuring 54 Israelis, wrote in his last will and testament: “Can there men of truth if we are ourselves are not (willing to be) men? A believer without courage is like a tree without fruit.” The mother of Abdel Mu’ti Shabana, who carried out the bombing on June 10, 2003, killing 17 and injuring over 100 Israelis, tells of how her son on the day of the operation asked her repeatedly to pray that God makes him successful in his upcoming test.

Moreover, the act of martyrdom is seen as an attempt to redeem society of its failure to act righteously. Words expressed by revered martyrs carry a great deal of weight. Thus, many suicide bombers use their statements to express their view of the ideal society and how individuals and communities should act to overcome the malaise that characterizes their condition. Muhammad Hazza’a al-ghoul, who blew himself up on a bus on June 18, 2002, killing 19 and injuring 74 Israelis, wrote in his last will and testament: “How beautiful for the splinters of my bones to be the response that blows up the enemy...not for the love of killing, but so we can live as other people live...We do not sing the hymns of death, but recite the songs of life...we die so that future generations may live.” Some urge their mothers, fathers, brothers and

sisters to pray regularly (especially the pre-dawn prayers), to wear the *hijab*, and to become from among the best Muslims on earth. Shadi Sleyman al-Nabaheen, who carried out a failed suicide mission on May 19, 2003, wrote in his last will and testament: “My dear brothers and sisters: Forgive me for any mistake or flaw that came from me...I urge you to be supportive of my mother and father and do not fall short (of your duty) toward them...Be from among the patient and steadfast and hold tightly to the religion of God. Guide your children to the mosque and instruct them to attend the *Qur’an* and recitation lessons, and teach them to love *jihād* and martyrdom.” Others urge their fellow Muslims to continue the struggle against Israel. Jihad Walid Hamada, who blew up a bus at Meron Junction on August 4, 2002 in Safd Israel, killing 10 and injuring 40, declares in his last will and testament: “May our blood become the light that shows the way toward liberation for those around us. Let us raise the banner of truth, the banner of Islam. Let us proceed forward sons of Palestine...the road is ahead of us.” Muhammad al-Habashi, who blew himself up killing three and injured 90 Israelis on September 9, 2001, wrote in his last will and testament: “I ask God almighty that my martyrdom is a message to all the Arab and Muslim people and nations to get rid of the injustice of their rulers, who are a burden upon their bosoms, and to rise to bring victory to Muslims in Jerusalem and Palestine, and in all conquered Muslim lands...”

The third theme that emerges is that of reward in the afterlife. However, reward here is not only for the bomber, but for the families of bombers. In many communiqués the bombers ask their mothers and fathers to forgive them and remind them that God has promised martyrs the privilege of interceding on behalf of seventy family members on judgment day. Hamed Abu Hejleh, who was mentioned previously, tells his family in his last will and testament: “If I have fallen short in my duty toward you in this world, I will not fall short during judgment day, God willing. For know that the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, has said that the martyr intercedes (with God) on behalf of seventy of his family members.” Shadi Sleyman al-Nabaheen, who I spoke of earlier, wrote to his mother and father in his last will and testament: “I wanted to beat you to heaven so I can intercede with my God on your behalf...”

These three themes speak of motivations that are not strategic, but religious and cultural, in nature. Strategy and cost-benefit calculations can inspire people to place bombs in crowded restaurants, take hostages, or shoot at soldiers from afar. The act of self-sacrifice, however,

requires motivations beyond strategy. Suicide bombers are motivated by religion or the opportunity to act heroic in situations of generalized powerlessness and conflict.

### ***Why Do Societies Venerate Suicide Bombers? The Logic of Communities in Conflict***

Societies under normal conditions do not embrace and venerate suicidal violence. Three conditions must converge for suicidal terror to be accepted and honored by society: (1) prevailing cultural norms and mores encompass belief systems, symbolic narratives, and historical traditions that justify and celebrate martyrdom; (2) legitimate authorities promote or acquiesce to extreme violence; and (3) groups or communities feel a deep sense of victimization by external enemies in the course of political conflict.

#### *Cultural Symbols and Narratives*

Organizers of violence must align their tactics with cultural norms, symbols, and ethics that give moral meaning to acts of violence. Culture provides a “tool kit” of concepts, myths, and symbols from which militant organizations could selectively draw to construct strategies of action. Religion, of course, is a primary component of culture. Religious notions of martyrdom and self-sacrifice have inspired violent campaigns in all religious traditions.

In the case of Palestinian suicide bombers, terror groups find in Islam a cultural toolkit that allows militants to frame their suicide attacks as a fulfillment of sacred imperatives to fight injustice. Like many societies in the Muslim world, significant segments of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza have become more religious in response Islamic revivalism or fundamentalism since the late 1970s. As a result, religious appeals have received greater acceptance, and religious symbolisms resonate much more readily than in previous decades.

Islam is a religion that values peace and justice, but it is not a pacifist religion. Islam encompasses many *Qur'anic* passages and prophetic traditions that urge Muslims to fight persecution and injustice in the path of God and not to fear death because those killed in battle will be rewarded by God. Concepts of *jihad* (striving), *qital* (fighting), and *istishhad* (martyrdom) abound in the *Qur'an* and all four Sunni Islamic schools of thought (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafa'i, and Hanbali) and Shi'i traditions agree that *jihad* and martyrdom, while not part of the five Islamic pillars of faith, are among the best expressions of religious devotion and surest way

to gain God's blessings. Following are some Qur'anic passages that have been referenced by militant groups to promote and justify suicidal attacks:

**Chapter 2: Verse 154:** And call not those who are slain in the way of Allah 'dead.' Nay, they are living, only ye perceive not.

**Chapter 2: Verse 216:** Fighting is commanded upon you even though it is disagreeable to you. But it is possible that you dislike something which is good for you and that you love something which is bad for you. God knows, but you know not.

**Chapter 3: Verse 169:** Think not of those, who are slain in the way of Allah, as dead. Nay, they are living. With their Lord they have provision.

**Chapter 3: Verse 195:** So their Lord accepted their prayer, (saying): I will not suffer the work of any worker among you to be lost whether male or female, the one of you being from the other. So those who fled and were driven forth from their homes and persecuted in My way and who fought and were slain, I shall truly remove their evil and make them enter Gardens wherein flow rivers – a reward from Allah. And with Allah is the best reward.

**Chapter 4: Verse 69:** Whoso obeyeth Allah and the messenger, they are with those unto whom Allah hath shown favor, of the Prophets and the saints and the martyrs and the righteous. The best of company are they!

**Chapter 4: Verse 74:** Whoever fights in the path of God, whether he be slain or victorious, on him We shall bestow a vast reward.

**Chapter 9: Verses 20-22:** Those who believe, and have left their homes and striven with their wealth and their lives in Allah's way are of much greater worth in Allah's sight. These are they who are triumphant. Their Lord giveth them good tidings of mercy from Him, and acceptance, and Gardens where enduring pleasure will be theirs; There they will abide for ever. Lo! with Allah there is immense reward."

**Chapter 47: Verses 4-7:** And those who are slain in the way of Allah, He will never allow their deeds to perish. He will guide them and improve their condition. And make them enter the Garden, which He has made known to them. O you who believe, if you help Allah, He will help you and make firm your feet.

**Chapter 61: Verses 10-12:** O ye who have believed, shall I point you to a trade which will save you from a punishment painful? Ye should believe in Allah and His messenger, and should strive for the cause of Allah with your wealth and your lives. That is better for you, if ye did but know. He will forgive you your sins and bring you into Gardens underneath which rivers flow, and pleasant dwellings in Gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph.

In addition to these *Qur'anic* verses, there are plenty of prophetic traditions or sayings that venerate martyrdom in the path of God. The Prophet Muhammad described *jihad* as the

“pinnacle of faith” (*sinam al-din*). In one prophetic saying (*hadith*), the Prophet Muhammad said “No slave [of God] who dies and has goodness with God wants to return to the world, even if he would have the world and all that is in it, except the martyr, for when he sees the greatness of martyrdom, he will want to return to the world and be killed again.” In another, the Prophet Muhammad was approached by a man who informed him “I found a sanctuary in the mountain, so I like to worship in it and pray until my time comes.” The prophet replied “Mightier in rank is a life in the path of God than sixty years of prayer at home (among family).” According to the Prophet, the benefits of martyrdom include:

1. Remission of one’s sins at the moment the martyr’s blood is shed.
2. Immediate admission into heaven, so martyrs do not suffer the punishment of the tomb.
3. The privilege of accompanying prophets, saints, and righteous believers in heaven.
4. Marriage to heavenly maidens (*hourī al-ayn*).
5. The right to intercede with God on behalf of seventy relatives.
6. Protection against the pain of death.
7. Entry into the highest gardens of heaven (*jannat al-firdaws*).

The concepts and traditions of *jihad* (striving), *qital* (fighting), and *istishhad* (martyrdom) in the path of God constitutes a cultural toolkit that has been retrieved by Islamic militants to legitimate rebellion against authorities deemed unjust. Muslims around the world learn the stories about the Prophet Muhammad, the persecution he suffered at the hands of his enemies, and how the dispossessed Muslims of Medina heroically fought and ultimately prevailed against their Meccan adversaries despite the odds and without fear of death. The dominant narrative – and the concomitant symbolism – of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Islamic community in Mecca and Medina is the defeat of unjust authority by righteous victims who did not recoil in the face of martyrdom and relied on their faith to help them triumph.

This narrative of fighting injustice through unparalleled faith and a desire for martyrdom, therefore, is not foreign to the Muslims in the Palestinian territories. Militant groups ingeniously framed their contemporary struggle as part and parcel of the Islamic tradition of *jihad* and martyrdom, and amplified this frame through ceremonies and rituals that link contemporary times to sacred history. One of the clearest examples of this is the celebration of “martyrs” through ululations, distribution of sweets, and congratulating the families of the bombers. Thus, instead of mourning the death of the suicide militants, organizations celebrate their entry to heaven as if it was their wedding day. Rather than term the operations “suicide bombings” (*taffirat intihariya*), they euphemistically term them “martyrdom operations” (*‘amaliyat*

*istishhadiyya*) because in Islam, as in other Abrahamic traditions, there are strict prohibitions against suicide. They have also honored mothers and fathers by giving them the title of “*Umm al-Shahid*” (mother of the martyr) or “*Abu al-Shahid*” (father of the martyr), instead of “*Umm Ahmad*” or “*Abu Omar*”. This title instills tremendous pride in families of bombers.

### *Legitimizing Authority*

Framing violence as a religiously-sanctioned duty often encounters opposing voices based on competing interpretations of sacred texts, prophetic traditions, and analysis of the circumstances that activate these sacred commandments. In the case of the Palestinians, however, the Palestinian authority, which was in a position to counter the radical ideology of the Islamic militants, failed to do so adequately and at times it promoted the culture of martyrdom that was instrumental to recruiting suicide bombers.

The *al-Aqsa* uprising that began in September 2000 may not have been started by the Palestinian Authority (PA), but the latter did very little to stop it. The PA contributed to the legitimization of suicidal violence in four ways. First, the Palestinian media continuously portrayed “martyrs” as heroic. Images of Palestinian youth dying by Israeli fire and posters of Palestinian militants were exhibited on television accompanied by melodramatic music and nationalistic songs that venerated death in battle.

Second, rather than unequivocally speak out against suicide attacks that target civilians, the PA always linked those attacks to the violence perpetrated by the Israelis against Palestinians. The usual condemnations of suicide attacks were phrased in the following manner: “We condemn all attacks against civilians, whether they are Israeli or Palestinian civilians. We call upon Israel and the international community to put an end to the conditions that breed violence against civilians.” This manner of “condemning” attacks was widely understood by the Palestinian public as “mere diplomatic talk” to placate international pressure. Moreover, it served to actually justify suicide bombings by implying that they were directly linked to “conditions” that forced people to blow themselves up.

Third, in the opening months of the uprising, the PA released many known militants who were connected to the suicide bombings of the mid-1990s. In doing so, they gave a “green light” to militant groups to carry out attacks without fear of retribution. Fourth, the PA repeatedly refused to investigate attacks against Israeli civilians until international pressure forced it to do

so in late 2001. Even then militants that were arrested were often released or actually confined for their own protection from Israeli assassinations.<sup>11</sup>

Religious authorities inside and outside of the Palestinian territories also spoke favorably about suicide attacks against Israeli civilians. Such support came not only from radical bastions of Islamism such as Iran or southern Lebanon, but also from traditionally conservative sources such as Egypt's Al-Azhar and Saudi Arabian preachers. Notable religious figures such as Sheikh 'Akrama Sabri, Chief Mufti of Jerusalem; Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyeb, Mufti of Egypt; Sheikh Muhammed Tantawi, Imam of al-Azhar in Egypt, all affirmed the right of Palestinians to carry out "martyrdom operations" against Israelis. Most of all, Sheikh Yussuf al-Qaradawi, the popular and well-respected religious scholar who has his weekly show on al-Jazeera television, repeatedly issued statements justifying "martyrdom operations" as legitimate *jihad* against occupiers of Muslim lands in Palestine.<sup>12</sup>

By refusing to explicitly and unequivocally condemn these attacks against Israeli civilians, legitimate authority gave radical ideology an opportunity to take root and spread in the Palestinian public. Despite the fact that Islam contains strict prohibitions against suicide and *Qur'anic* and prophetic traditions that speak against killing women and children, religious and government authorities did not attempt to counter the religious framing of militant groups.

### *Polarizing Conflicts and Perceived Victimization*

Extreme violence does not develop in a vacuum; it usually follows previous cycles of low-intensity violence that polarize communities and foster feelings of victimization. Societies embrace extreme violence when they perceive overwhelming threats to their security, identity, or national aspirations, and when they see themselves solely as the victims at the hands of unjust authorities. A progression of radicalization must take place before communities agree to support extreme measures. Absent overwhelming threats and feelings of victimization – whether real or perceived – societies are likely to reject extreme violence against ordinary civilians.

In the case of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the initial rounds of violence in the first few months of the uprising that began in September 2000 polarized the two nations as each side saw the other as unduly aggressive and brutal in its treatment of the other. The Palestinians repeatedly pointed out the high casualty rates suffered at the hands of Israeli forces. Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, who heads the Palestinian Health, Development, Information and Policy Institute, argues that

“About 48 percent of those who died were shot in the head or neck. That means the soldiers shot to kill, as if they were anxious to prove their marksmanship and create a strong psychological effect. If you are in a life-threatening situation, you don’t take your time to pinpoint the head.” According to Barghouti, 319 Palestinians were killed in the first 12 weeks (9/29 – 12/18). 16% were aged 15 or less, 20% 16-18, 44% 19-29, 12% 30-39, and 8% above 40. Only 5% were killed in armed clashes, 56.7% in civilian demonstrations, and 4.1% were assassinated.<sup>13</sup>

From the Israeli perspective, Palestinians (and their government) turned to violence to achieve their strategic aims after pledging to renounce violence during the Oslo peace process. Moreover, the Palestinians used violence after the Israeli government was willing to make the most generous concessions in the history of peace negotiations between the two parties. Waging war on Israel during the final status talks showed bad faith on the part of the Palestinians and determination to gain advantages through violence. Moreover, the Palestinian protest was hardly peaceful as Palestinian policemen armed by Israel turned their guns on Israeli soldiers. According to Former Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh, “If this level of violence had been maintained against any other army in the world, the death toll would have been at least 3,000, not 300.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, it did not take long for the Palestinians to employ violence against civilian targets, with the aim of harming civilians. Whereas the Israelis sought to avoid civilian casualties, the Palestinians sought to increase them.

Perceptions of victimization on each side in the opening rounds of fighting created an environment of insecurity, resulting in demands on each side for an escalation to end the state of insecurity as well as punish the other side for acting unjustly. As the cycle of violence deepened, support for extreme measures on each side began in earnest. On the Palestinian side, public opinion polls began to express greater support for suicide bombings against Israeli civilians. In March 1999, the last poll taken by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center before the Al-Aqsa uprising, 26.1% of Palestinians supported suicide bombings against Israel; in December 2000, three months into the uprising, 66.2% favored such attacks. The peak of support for suicide terrorism came in October 2003, when it reached 74.5% (poll taken by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah, West Bank).

As a result of such wide support for suicide terrorism, militant groups began to compete with each other on who will deliver the severest blow to satisfy Palestinian demands for revenge. Initially, suicide attacks were the preferred tactics of the religious factions ( Hamas and Islamic

Jihad), but within a year after the initial wave, nationalist and secularist groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades entered the fray with suicide attacks.

The Israeli response to Palestinian violence was equally brutal. Aerial and naval attacks on Palestinian police stations and government institutions were seen as deliberate attempts to destroy the Palestinian Authority and the foundations of a future Palestinian state. Curfews, closures, and checkpoints of Palestinian towns and cities were seen as unfair collective punishments and an attempt to humiliate Palestinians in their own land. Targeted assassinations, home demolitions, and military incursions deepened feelings of victimization and widened calls for retaliation. Each Israeli attack was seen as a “massacre” and each Palestinian death was portrayed as a “war crime.”

The ultimate Israeli response to Palestinian violence, however, was the election of Ariel Sharon to the position of Prime Minister in February 2001. This constituted the most serious threat to Palestinian national aspirations. In the mind of many Palestinians, Sharon is not just a hawkish leader; he is an ideology and a symbol of Palestinian victimization. Sharon is associated with the founding of hard-line policies in the occupied territories, the father of the settlement movement, and the defense minister responsible for the 1982 war in Lebanon and the subsequent ouster of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from the bordering state. He is seen as a vociferous opponent of the Oslo accords and a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders. Most of all, Sharon is associated with massacres against Palestinians in Sabra and Shatilla in 1982, when hundreds of defenseless civilians in refugee camps perished at the hands of Christian militias. The election of Sharon meant that the peace process was likely to stagnate and all hopes for an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza were likely to fade. In light of the apparent threat to their institutions and national aspirations, many Palestinians felt that extreme violence in the form of suicide bombings against a civilian population that elected Sharon was justified.<sup>15</sup> In April 2001, a month after Sharon formed his government, support for suicide bombers increased from 66.2% (December 2000) to 73.7%.<sup>16</sup>

The confluence of perceived threats and feelings of victimization is essential to explaining why Palestinian society came to venerate martyrdom. The failure of the Palestinian Authority and religious leaders to counter this trend only added fuel to the fire. Escalation by

both sides of the conflict created a security dilemma whereby one's security depend it on taking measures that deepened the insecurity of the other side.

## **Summary**

Suicide terrorism is a complex and over determined phenomenon that must be studied at three levels of analysis: individual motivations, organizational strategies, and societal developments. At each level of analysis, different variables are at play. At the level of the individual, religious appeals that equate suicide terrorism with martyrdom are instrumental in producing volunteers for suicide attacks. At the level of the organization, strategic considerations in the context of asymmetrical warfare are the primary explanation of why organizations choose to adopt suicide terrorism as the preferred tactic from the repertoire of tactics at its disposal. At the level of society, communities embrace suicide terrorism and venerate it as an act of martyrdom when three conditions converge: (1) cultural norms encompass belief systems, symbolic narratives, and historical traditions that justify and celebrate martyrdom; (2) legitimate authorities promote or acquiesce to extreme violence; and (3) groups or communities feel a deep sense of victimization by external enemies in the course of political conflict.

## **What We Need to Know? Areas for Future Research**

The study of suicide bombings is in its infancy. We have a long road ahead of us before we can develop valid, comprehensive, cross-national explanations of this phenomenon, and perhaps an even longer road to be able to specify the conditions and indicators that could help us predict and prevent suicide bombings. I propose that we allocate resources toward five research tasks that are necessary to understand, explain, and, ultimately, predict and prevent suicide terrorism: single case studies; comparative studies; data-bases for large-n studies; data-bases of biographies for suicide terrorists; and systematic interview of captured suicidal terrorists.

### *Single Case Studies*

Detailed case studies of individuals, groups, and societies that embrace suicide terrorism can shed tremendous light on this phenomenon and suggest possible hypotheses that could be explored in other cases. To do so successfully, we need county or regional experts that speak

relevant foreign languages to undertake in-depth investigations of suicide terrorism framed by the three research questions I posed in the beginning of this report: why do individuals do it, why do groups promote it, and why do societies embrace it?

Single case studies operate inductively, so prior theorizing is not necessary. We need the facts first and foremost. If resources are limited, priority should be given to the following cases: Al-Qaeda, Iraq, Israel, Chechnya, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Saudi Arabia. In all these cases, we have seen a pattern of suicide terrorism, as opposed to isolated incidents. Hizbullah in Lebanon is another useful case that one could tackle, but I think we have enough research on this subject.

### *Comparative Studies*

Comparative (small-n) studies that compare and contrast two or more cases can help identify patterns across countries or regions. The idea is to go beyond factual analysis toward isolating causal variables and formulating testable theories. For comparative research to be successful, it must ask the same set of questions across the cases, and seek the same set of evidence in these cases. Comparative studies help us determine what is unique to a case and what variables to test in large-n statistical studies. Comparative studies can generate hypotheses that could be tested and validated through large-n studies.

### *Databases for Large-N Studies*

We are in dire need of databases on suicide terrorism that capture every episode when it happens and records the details of the attack: date; place; nature of target; name, age, and city of the suicide terrorist; names of victims; and so on. This data allows us to carry out large-n statistical studies that compare several countries at once, not just two or three. In addition, we need to contextualize this data by capturing other episodes of non-suicidal violence in a given country or conflict. By doing so, we not only are able to compare patterns of suicide terrorism across countries, but also patterns within countries. Also, by capturing data on suicidal and non-suicidal violence, we are able to determine if counter-terrorism strategies have led to a reduction in all forms of violence, or merely a substitution of violence from one form to another.

In my research, I was forced to create my own database using three research assistants. It took over 300 hours of work to set up the database and additional hours are required as events

unfold. Time effort aside, the database is difficult to set up because one runs into interpretive problems and potential biases in sources. To ensure the reliability of the data, we need to set up a dedicated team that uses similar criteria for capturing data for each country under study.

#### *Database for Biographies of Suicide Terrorists*

To understand what motivates individuals to undertake suicide terrorism, we need to capture data on the biographies of suicide terrorists. Some of this data is available on the web sites of terror groups and I have collected a great deal from the web sites of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Other sources include news interviews with families and friends of suicide bombers. However, we need a more systematic way to capture the individual histories of suicide terrorists, including interviews with their classmates, friends, and families. We need to develop a standard questionnaire that asks about the terrorist's age, gender, birthplace, economic background, religious habits, political beliefs, history of activism, and personal events that may have shaped his or her decision to become a "martyr." These biographies could be used to analyze the motivations of terrorists as well as validate our theories about why people become suicide terrorists.

#### *Systematic Interviews of Captured Terrorists*

Researchers like Ariel Merari and Jerrold Post have undertaken interviews with suicide terrorists captured by authorities before they were able to carry out their attacks. I have come across several valuable documentaries that do the same. Although there is a risk that these interviews under conditions of imprisonment may not yield candid responses, they are tremendously helpful in providing insights about individual motivations to engage in terrorism and can serve as a validity check on our theories of why people do it. Similar studies of captured Red Army Faction (RAF) terrorists have been carried out by analysts in Germany, producing volumes of empirical findings.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In late October 2003, 74.5% of Palestinians supported suicide attacks against Israeli targets. In June 2004, the number declined substantially, but nonetheless 58.6% of the Palestinians continue to support suicide attacks against Israelis. During the peace years, support for suicide bombings never exceeded 35.5%, which was in 1997, when the hawkish Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu was in office (All poll data is provided by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah, West Bank).

<sup>2</sup> Ilene R. Prusher, “As life looks bleaker, suicide bombers get younger,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 5, 2004; David Brooks, “The Culture of Martyrdom: How suicide bombing became not just a means by an end,” *Atlantic Monthly*, June 2002; Kevin Toolis, “Where Suicide is a Cult” *The Observer* (London), December 16, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Lori Allen, “There are Many Reasons Why: Suicide Bombers and Martyrs in Palestine” *Middle East Report*, Vol. 32, No. 223, 2002: 34-37; Shibley Telhami, “Why Suicide Terrorism Takes Root” *New York Times*, April 4, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Libby Copeland, “Female Suicide Bombers: The New Factor in Mideast’s Deadly Equation” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2002; Joel Greenberg, “Portrait of an Angry Young Arab Woman” *New York Times*, March 1, 2002. Hamas employed its first female suicide bomber, a married mother of two, in January 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Davis, “Aksa Bombers Educated, Middle-Class” *Jerusalem Post*, March 25, 2002; N. Hassan, “An Arsenal of Believers” *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Gal Luft, “The Palestinian H-Bomb: Terror’s Winning Strategy” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2002; Molly Moore and J. W. Anderson, “Suicide Bombers Change Mideast’s Military Balance” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Interview on *Al-Jazeera* television program “Opposite Direction,” August 20, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> See also Human Rights Watch, *Erased In a Moment: Suicide Bombing Attacks Against Israeli Civilians*, October 2002 (New York: Human Rights Watch).

<sup>9</sup> The mother of Muhammad Ahmed Halas spoke of how she purchased sweets in anticipation of her son’s martyrdom and when the moment came, “I distributed them among the neighbors and began to rejoice.”

<sup>10</sup> One report estimates that 75% of Palestinian youth dream of martyrdom. See Amal Shahada, Palestinian Children: 75% Dream of Carrying out a Martyrdom Operation” (Arabic) *al-Wasat* (London), January 20, 2003. Eward Cody, “When ‘Martyrs’ Are not Yet Men: Palestinians Fear Rise of Youth Suicide Culture” *Washington Post*, May 10, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Amnesty International, “Israel and the Occupied Territories and the Palestinian Authority: Killing the Future: Children in the Line of Fire,” October 2002, AI Index: MDE 02/005/2002; Amnesty International, “Israel and the Occupied Territories: Broken Lives – A Year of Intifada,” September 2001, AI Index: MDE 15/083/2001; Human Rights Watch, *Erased In a Moment: Suicide Bombing Attacks Against Israeli Civilians*, October 2002 (New York: Human Rights Watch).

<sup>12</sup> See Yussuf al-Qardawi’s fatwa (religious ruling) entitled, “Martyrdom Operations in Occupied Palestine Represent One of the Greatest Forms of Jihad in the Path of God.” See also his commentary on *al-Jazeera* on September 16, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Leslie Susser, “‘We are saving many, many lives’” *The Jerusalem Report*, January, 15 2001. See also the comments of Ghassan al-Khatib, former Palestinian Minister of Labor, who attributes the militarization of the *intifada* to excessive force by the Israelis against civilian demonstrators and availability of arms to Palestinian factions. He points out that in the first 10 days of the *intifada*, Israel killed a hundred Palestinian civilians, an average of 10 people per day, in addition to 13 Arab-Isrealis killed inside Israel. “Those people didn’t carry arms, they were not on their way to carry out bomb attacks, they were only taking part in largely peaceful demonstrations,

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and only a few were throwing stones. Nonetheless, Israeli soldiers were ordered to shoot and kill those people...All this shows that Israel drove us to resort to the armed intifada.” His comments were reported by Khalid Amayreh, “Palestinians split on ‘armed intifada’,” Al-Jazeera TV (Arabic, online), October 19, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Leslie Susser, ““We are saving many, many lives”” The Jerusalem Report, January, 15 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Khalil Shikaki, “Palestinian Public Opinion and the al Aqsa Intifada” *Strategic Assessment*, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, Vol. 5, No. 1, June 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Jerusalem Media and Communication Center - Poll #41 - April 2001.