

## **The Motivations of Palestinian Suicide Bombers in the Second *Intifada* (2000-05)\***

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## **Abstract**

Despite the relatively long history of Palestinian suicide bombing (1993-2009), research about Palestinian bombers based on primary data is rare, and no previous study analyzes a representative sample of cases. Based on interviews the author conducted in 2006 with close relatives and friends of 42 randomly selected Palestinian suicide bombers, representing about one-quarter of Palestinian bombers during the second *intifada* or uprising (2000-05), this article concludes that the motivations of Palestinian suicide bombers are typically complex. In descending order of importance, motivations include the (1) desire for revenge against Israeli forces and their harsh repressive measures, (2) religious inspiration, and (3) desire for liberation of the homeland. These findings are used to critically evaluate prevailing interpretations of the motivations of suicide bombers, including arguments based on psychopathology, absolute and relative deprivation, cultural determinism, and rational choice.

## Introduction

When I interviewed the mother of Saher Hemdallah Tummam, the first Palestinian suicide bomber, she told me that I was the first researcher or journalist to interview the family despite the fact that her son's attack was conducted thirteen years earlier and was probably the first suicide bombing in the Islamic world organized by a Sunni religious organization. Scholars have conducted many studies about Palestinian suicide bombing since Tumam's attack in 1993. Many generalizations and theoretical claims accompany them. However, as the remark of Tumam's mother suggests, research about suicide bombers based on primary data is rare (Kimhi and Even, 2004; Merari, 2007; Ricolfi, 2005). What is more, no studies have been based on representative samples of Palestinian suicide bombers.

This state of affairs is not the result of scholars ignoring the Palestinian case. To the contrary, the long history of Palestinian suicide bombing, the high frequency of attacks, and the world-historical importance of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have attracted the attention of many scholars to the Palestinian case. Little research exists on suicide bombers using primary data and based on representative samples, partly because individuals turn into research subjects only when they die (successful suicide bombers), are arrested (failed suicide bombers), or became wanted by the authorities (potential suicide bombers). In each case, obtaining primary data about the motivations of the bombers is often challenging and sometimes risky.

To overcome deficiencies in our knowledge about suicide bombers, I conducted interviews with close relatives and friends of 42 suicide bombers, randomly selected from the pool of 173 Palestinian suicide bombers during the second *intifada* (2000-05). The interviews were conducted in the spring and summer of 2006 in the homes of the families of the bombers.

I define suicide bombing as "the use of explosives against one or more people by one or more attackers. The attackers enjoy organizational support and know in advance and with certainty that their actions will result in their deaths." By that definition, "merely planning an attack does not qualify as a suicide bombing; the attacker must be *en route* to his or her target. Nor is death or injury a necessary part of [the] definition since on occasion a suicide bomber is apprehended and disarmed after an attack has been launched but before detonation" (Brym and Araj, 2006: 1974).

I begin by reviewing the literature on suicide bombers, particularly those that focus on the Palestinian case. After outlining how I collected the data, I analyze the motivations of Palestinian bombers. In concluding, I discuss the theoretical implications of my research.

## **Literature Review**

Social scientists have sought to explain the growing incidence of suicide bombing since the early 1980s by focusing on the alleged psychopathology of suicide bombers, the deprivations they supposedly experience, the religious *milieux* from which they presumably originate, the degree to which suicide bombing serves their strategic interests, and the effect of the target state's repressive actions on the insurgents' choice of tactics and the magnitude of their suicide attacks. Let us briefly consider each of these approaches in turn.

### ***Psychopathology***

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, social scientists first proposed that an irrational or pathological state of mind typically precipitates collective violence (Le Bon 1969 [1895]: 28). The idea spread widely and is certainly evident in suicide bombing research (Reich, 1990). Some analysts assume that suicide bombers are necessarily suicidal or suffer from some other psychological problems such as a narcissistic personality disorder or an authoritarian personality, to the point that they lack a moral compass (Lester, Yang, and Lindsay, 2004; McCauley, 2007: 14; Post, 1990: 25). Kimhi and Even (2004) and Kennedy (2006) provide useful reviews of the psychopathological approach to suicide bombing.

After reviewing much of the relevant literature, Brym and Araj (2006: 1970) concluded that individualistic explanations based on psychopathology are of no value in helping us understanding the rising incidence of suicide bombing. Among other works, they cite Pape's study of all 462 suicide bombers who attacked targets worldwide between 1980 and 2003. Pape found not a single case of psychopathology (depression, psychosis, past suicide attempts, and so on) among them, and only one case of probable mental retardation. They also cite research showing that "recruits who display signs of pathological behaviour are automatically weeded out for reasons of organizational security" (Brym and Araj, 2006: 1970; cf. McCauley, 2007: 15). Other researchers have reached similar conclusions (Kimhi and Even, 2004; McCauley, 2007; Merari, 2007).

As McCauly (2007: 14) put it, “thirty years ago” psychological explanations of suicide terrorism were “taken very seriously, but thirty years of research has found little evidence that terrorists are suffering from psychopathology.”

### *Deprivation*

A second theory of suicide bombing focuses on the deprivations, absolute or relative, that suicide bombers supposedly suffer. Relative deprivation refers to the growth of an intolerable gap between expectations and rewards. Absolute deprivation refers to longstanding poverty and unemployment. According to Gurr (1970: 17), the “basic frustration-aggression proposition is that the greater the frustration, the greater the quantity of aggression against the source of frustration. This postulate provides the motivational base for an initial proposition about political violence: the greater the intensity of deprivation, the greater the magnitude of violence.” Gurr also maintains that the potential for violence in a collectivity varies with the intensity of discontent, which range from mild dissatisfaction to rage, and the proportion of its members who are intensely discontented.

The deprivation approach has informed much suicide bombing research. Piazza (2008: 35) concludes that scholars are “sharply divided on the relationship between poverty and suicide terrorism.” However, my reading of the evidence suggests that suicide bombers are not especially deprived. For example, Krueger and Malekova (2003) found that Palestinian suicide attackers tend to come from wealthier families and have relatively high levels of education. Berrebi’s (2007) analysis of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) between the late 1980s and 2002 shows that higher education and a higher standard of living are positively associated with participation in Hamas and PIJ and with becoming a suicide bomber. Laqueur (2004: 16) notes that suicide bombers from Egypt and Saudi Arabia have come mainly from middle class or upper-middle-class families. Most of the 19 hijackers who took part in the 9/11 attacks belonged to middle class Saudi Arabian families and many had a higher education (Valino, Buesa, and Baumert, 2010). Pape (2005) collected education and income data on about 30 percent of Arab suicide bombers between 1980 and 2003, and concluded that they were much better educated than the populations from which they were recruited. They were typically from the working and middle classes and were seldom unemployed or poor. Merari could not find a discernible socioeconomic pattern among Palestinian suicide bombers (cited in Piazza, 2008:35). Kruger

(2007) found that terrorism is not significantly higher for poorer countries and that education and poverty probably have little to do with terrorism. After reviewing the literature, Valino and his colleagues concluded that there is little chance that reducing poverty or increasing education would help to reduce terrorism (Valino, Buesa, and Baumert, 2010).

Elevating the debate to a higher ecological level, Kristof (2002) shows a strong association between inequality in income distribution and terrorism. Gunaratna (2002) notes that suicide attacks are common in conflicts in underdeveloped political economies. Pedahzur, Perliger, and Weinberg (2003) maintain that Palestinian suicide bombers come disproportionately from especially deprived socioeconomic regions of the West Bank and Gaza. Saleh (2009: 17-18) provides evidence indicating a strong correlation between economic conditions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the number of Palestinian attacks during the period 1990-2002. However, Moghadam (2006: 96) distinguishes the direct and indirect effects of economic development on suicide attacks. He notes that economic motives have at most indirect effects. For example, poor countries are more likely to serve as safe havens for terrorists. In addition, poor countries are more likely to undergo ethnic and religious conflict, which in turn breeds terrorism. There may be an association between poor regions and suicide bombing, but it is spurious in Moghadam's view.

In short, while scholars are divided on the relationship between deprivation and suicide bombing, the bulk of the evidence suggests that one ought to look elsewhere for a credible explanation.

### *Culture*

Merari (2007: 101) maintains that the most common explanation of suicide bombing emphasizes cultural factors, especially Islamic religious fanaticism. From this point of view, Islam has always inclined Muslims to violent hatred of the West, and it continues to do so today. This is the "clash of civilizations" thesis, popularized by Huntington (1996).

Hunter (1998) criticizes Huntington for his ahistoricism. She contends that by paying attention to intra-civilizational conflicts and inter-civilization instances of cooperation, one arrives at a very different picture of Western-Muslim relations – one suggesting that the conflict between some Muslims and Western states is mainly political, not cultural. Hunter also argues

that one of the more intractable barriers to good relations between Muslims and Western countries is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Supporting Hunter's claims are public opinion polls showing that Arabs in the Middle East hold strongly favourable attitudes toward American science and technology, freedom and democracy, education, movies and television, and largely favourable attitudes toward the American people. They hold strongly negative attitudes only toward American Middle East policy (Zogby, 2002).

One must also bear in mind that suicide attacks have been used in non-Islamic societies such as Japan and Sri Lanka and by non-Islamic (including Marxist) organizations in Muslim-majority countries. According to Pape (2005: 210), among the 83 percent of suicide attackers between 1980 and 2003 for whom data on ideological background is available, only 43 percent were discernibly religious.

Finally, suicide attacks are by no means a constant in Islamic history. They have appeared episodically in the Muslim world since the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Cultural constants can hardly explain such variation over time; changing political circumstances can (Brym and Araj, 2006: 1972). As Ricolfi (2005: 112) notes, "religious beliefs do not mould individuals, forcing them to become martyrs; they are sets of ideas that 'are there', as on the shelves of a supermarket, waiting for someone to make them their own. The question we should ask ourselves, then, is under what conditions individuals involved in a political cause discover the symbolic resources that religion, or perhaps certain religions more than others, has to offer."

Despite these objections, one cannot dismiss entirely the effects of culture on suicide bombing. The availability of certain cultural resources may increase the probability that some groups will engage in suicide attacks. Moreover, the effect of culture on suicide bombing still requires examination because most scholars who have studied the subject focus on just one element of culture – religion – while ignoring others (Araj, 2008).

In sum, despite its popularity, I question the veracity of the broad religious explanation for the motivations of suicide bombers. A more qualified cultural explanation may have merit although it awaits solid evidence.

### ***Rational Choice***

There are two main versions of rational choice theory that attempt to explain suicide bombing – Pape’s strategic choice theory (2003, 2005) and Bloom’s (2005) outbidding thesis.

Pape (2005: 21-40) argues that suicide terrorism is primarily an extreme national liberation strategy used against foreign occupiers with a democratic political system. Every group mounting a suicide campaign over the past two decades has had as a major objective coercing a foreign state that has military forces in what the terrorists see as their homeland to remove those forces. To support this argument, Pape cites leaders of several suicide bombing organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. They stated plainly that their chief aim is to liberate their countries from what they regard as foreign occupation or control. To support his claim that suicide bombing is a rational strategy, Pape notes that suicide attacks occur in clusters as part of a campaign by organized groups to achieve a political goal. Pape found that suicide bombing has a roughly 50 percent success rate and he regards that as high, since, by comparison, international military and economic coercion achieves its goals less than a third of the time. In short, Pape claims that strategic rationality is evident in the timing, objectives and results of suicide bombings campaigns.

To test Pape’s ideas, Brym and Araj (2006) created a database pertaining to the use of insurgent and state violence in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza from October 2000 to July 2005. It included information on the motives of suicide bombers, the rationales of their organizations and the precipitants of suicide attacks. They found little evidence to support Pape’s contention that suicide attacks are timed to maximize the achievement of strategic or tactical goals; their analysis of precipitants lead them to conclude that most suicide bombings were revenge or retaliatory attacks. They also found that only 13 percent of the 165 organizational rationales they identified included long-term strategic goals such as ending the Israeli occupation; most rationales (59 percent) involved reactions to specific Israeli actions. Moreover, contrary to Pape’s assertion, they found that the effect of suicide bombing was the opposite of what was intended by insurgents; suicide bombing drove Israeli public opinion to the right, helped hardliner Ariel Sharon win the 2001 and 2003 elections, and encouraged Israel to reoccupy Palestinian population centres in the West Bank and Gaza.

Bloom (2005: 84) criticized Pape’s theory for glossing over the domestic political and organizational dynamics underlying suicide attacks. She emphasized “outbidding” as a key



dynamic in that regard. Specifically, she proposed that suicide attacks are a currency for outbidding rivals in the competition for popular support. From her perspective, terrorist groups use suicide bombing when other tactics fail and when they compete with other groups for popular and financial support.

Brym and Araj (2008) reanalyzed Palestinian public opinion poll data to test Bloom's argument. After correcting transcription errors in her data, they found that the correlation between popular support for suicide bombing and the frequency of suicide bombings in the proceeding month fails to reach statistical significance at the .05 level. Increased popular support for Fatah was not preceded by a statistically significant increase in the frequency of suicide bombings by Fatah. Nor was increased popular support for Hamas preceded by a statistically significant increase in the frequency of suicide bombings by Hamas (see also Araj, 2008).

### ***State Repression***

While the motivation behind suicide attacks according to the national-liberation approach is the existence of an occupation per se, the motivations behind those attacks according to the state repression approach are related to the repressive actions and policies the occupying power uses to protect itself and put an end to protest or insurgency. As Brym and Araj (2006) note, since these kinds of suicide attacks are often reactive (precipitated by the actions of the occupying power), their timing is not always determined by insurgents and is not necessarily strategically planned either at the organizational or the individual level.

The effect of state repression on the motivations of individual bombers has been acknowledged by some previous studies. For example, De Figueiredo and Weingast (1998) argue that Palestinian suicide bombings in the 1990s can be traced to Israeli provocations beginning with the Hebron Massacre by Baruch Goldstein in 1994, and continued with the targeted assassinations of Palestinian militant leaders such as Hamas bomb maker Yahiyeh Ayyash in 1996. Hassan (2001) found that many of the 1990s bombers suffered humiliation and persecution at the hands of Israeli forces. Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Canetti-Nisim (2003: 143) found that suicide bombers or their friends and relatives had previous negative experiences with the Israeli authorities, prompting a desire to wreak vengeance. Kimhi and Even (2004: 824) found that among the 60 cases they analysed, 13 expressed the desire for revenge as their main motivation.

In sum, thirty years of research has found little evidence that suicide bombers suffer from psychopathology. Some scholars still debate whether deprivation or poverty incite suicide bombing, but most seem to agree that suicide bombers are not especially deprived. The evidence does not support purely cultural explanations. Rational choice theory represents an important advance but suffers from several weaknesses that I have outlined. However, based on my literature review, it is also evident that empirical research about individual bombers based on primary data is rare; no extant study examines the motivations of Palestinian suicide bombers based on a representative sample; and the debate about the motivations of suicide bombers has therefore not been resolved. Accordingly, I find it necessary to address five theoretical issues in the following analysis:

1. To what degree did psychopathology (or, less dramatically, personal crisis) play a role in motivating Palestinian suicide bombers during the second *intifada*?
2. To what degree were suicide bombers motivated to act by economic need (deprivation) and/or financial inducements?
3. To what degree did the cultural background of suicide bombers – in particular, their strict adherence to Islam – incite them to attack?
4. To what degree was the decision to engage in suicide bombing a rational, strategic choice based on the desire for national liberation?
5. To what degree did Israeli state repression create an emotional basis for revenge in the form of suicide bombing?

## **Methodology**

The Brym and Araj (2006) database of collective violence events during the second *intifada* contains the names of all suicide bombers and the dates of their attacks, among other data. I drew a random sample of 25 percent of all 173 suicide bombers from that source. Thirty-three were from the West Bank, nine from Gaza. I conducted the West Bank interviews. I also trained and closely supervised two female research assistants – one to conduct the Gaza interviews, and a second to conduct interview with women on the West Bank (see below). All interviews were recorded. Each was approximately 90 minutes in duration.

Typically, my research assistants and I would visit each family twice – once to see if they were willing to participate in the study and to make an appointment for the interview, the second time to conduct the interview. It was not difficult to convince members of the overwhelming majority of these families to be interviewed and speak frankly. In the few cases where we felt the family might not be entirely open (for example, when the motivation of the bomber involved perceived redemption from a sin or grave misdeed), we interviewed other people (close friends and occasionally neighbours) who might provide us with more valid answers. Undoubtedly, the ideal way to study the motivations of suicide bomber would be to ask the bombers themselves about their motivations, backgrounds and lives before they attack or after they have failed in their attempt. However, it is not possible to identify potential bombers or interview failed suicide bombers sitting in Israeli prisons. The method I chose for collecting data about the bombers is the best possible under the circumstances.

Towards the end of the interview, after good rapport had been established with the respondents, they were asked about the motivations of the bomber to carry out the suicide attack. They were also asked to rank each of the motives they mentioned in order of importance and to support their answers by quoting or paraphrasing the bomber. Interviews were conducted with at last two family members of each suicide bomber. To respect religious norms, I interviewed male relatives in one room of the suicide bomber's home and a female research assistant interviewed female relatives in another room. This procedure allowed me to compare answers independently given by different respondents from the same family. I also compared answers with media reports if available and with materials that the bomber left behind, including videotapes, Wills, and letters.

In the infrequent case where there was a contradiction between sources, I consulted additional sources until I could distinguish a consensus viewpoint. If it was not possible to establish a consensus viewpoint, I classified the datum as unknown. In the overwhelming majority of cases, however, data collected from different sources were consistent. Thus, the motivations of the bombers were identified and ranked by (1) analyzing pre-attack oral and written statements made by the bomber, (2) interviewing members of the bomber's family and his or her close friends, who recalled the bomber's words and actions and on that basis claimed to know his or her motivations, and (3) comparing information from diverse sources and arriving at a consensus view or, rarely, classifying a datum as unknown.

## **Results and Discussion**

As Table 1 shows, I was able to identify the motivations of 40 of the 42 bombers. In 31 cases, respondents mentioned a second motivation and in 21 cases a third motivation.

– Table 1 about here –

### ***Psychological Forces and Personal Crises***

To examine the degree to which bombers were influenced by personal crises or psychopathology, respondents were asked whether the suicide bomber was physically and mentally healthy and whether he or she suffered any social, emotional or other type of personal crisis in the year before the bombing that might have affected the decision to participate in the attack.

Forty of the 42 bombers were physically and mentally healthy. Several of the families stressed that the bomber was athletic and participated in competitive sports. Only one bomber had a physical disability prior to the bombing. Only one had a mental disability. The Israeli internal security service recruited him to collect information on a local leader from Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). However, the leader discovered the mole, and then gave him the opportunity to redeem himself by becoming a suicide bomber or face the consequences. When he blew himself up, several Israeli intelligence officers and soldiers were seriously injured.

In six cases, bombers suffered social, emotional or financial crises in the year preceding their attack that contributed to the decision to participate in a suicide bombing. When asked for details, it turned out that Israeli actions were responsible for four of the six cases. The first case was that of the double agent just mentioned. The discovery of his ties to the Israeli intelligence service created a severe psychological dilemma. The second case involved a man who decided to blow himself up to clear his family's name and to avenge the assassination of his cousin, a Hamas leader, by the Israelis. A Palestinian internal investigation after the assassination revealed that the suicide bomber's brother was a collaborator and that he played a vital role in the assassination of this own cousin. This was a shameful situation that the bomber could not tolerate. The third case involved Abedalbasit Awdeh, the perpetrator of the second *intifada's* deadliest suicide bombing in Netanya in March 2002. According to his brother, the Israeli decision to ban his travel caused him deep emotional pain because it prevented him from

marrying the woman he loved. She lived in Iraq, and Israeli military regulations prevented her from moving to Palestine. His brother stressed, however, that that was *not* a main motivation for the involvement of his brother in suicide attacks. Fourth is the case of Ibraheem Naji who, according to his parents, felt lonely and depressed after the assassination of two of his close friends and the arrest of others by the Israelis. Eventually, he blew himself up to avenge the killing of his friends and in reaction to the humiliation of his father during an Israeli incursion into the refugee camp.

In the two remaining cases, personal crises were influential. One, Abdalfatah Rashid, was a police officer. He accidentally killed a Palestinian prisoner during an interrogation regarding the theft of a car. Rashid was jailed but then escaped. Now wanted by the Palestinian Authority and fearful that the family of his victim might pursue him, it was relatively easy for a militant from PIJ whom he had met in prison to convince him to carry out a suicide attack. To support the argument that his plan to become a suicide bomber was precipitous, his brother told me that Rashid had proposed marriage shortly before the incident in the police station. In the final case, the mother of one of the bombers mentioned the chronic financial crisis of the family as a supporting factor that might have encouraged her son to blow himself up.

In addition to the six cases just discussed, social and economic factors were mentioned three times as minor or supporting motivations. In three of these cases, the social and economic difficulties the bomber faced were moderate and did not reach the level of a crisis.

Finally, I must mention Reem Riashee, Hamas's first female suicide bomber and the first Palestinian mother to blow herself up (she had two children). Unfortunately, I was unable to confirm whether her bombing was due to pressure from her husband, a Hamas' supporter who, according to media reports, forced his wife to conduct the attack as atonement for adultery. When he was interviewed by my research assistant in Gaza, he rejected such reports, saying that "Reem died and her secret [motivation] died with her."

In conclusion, 95 percent of Palestinian bombers during the second *intifada* were physically and mentally healthy. Fourteen percent of them suffered from a personal crisis, two-thirds of those triggered by Israeli actions. However, Palestinian organizations apparently avoided recruiting individuals suffering from psychopathology; only one bomber can be classified as mentally disturbed. In addition, only one bomber can be classified with certainty as having been exploited by a militant organization (the case of the police officer who accidentally

killed the prisoner). If we accept media reports regarding Hamas's first female suicide bomber, the number of cases that were exploited by insurgents rises to two.

Let us now examine the effect of economic and financial factors on the motivations of Palestinian suicide bombers.

### ***Economic and Financial Factors***

Ninety-five percent of the respondents ruled out any effect of economic and financial factors on bombers' motivations. In only two cases, family members said that the difficult economic situation of the family contributed to the decision to engage in a suicide attack. Even in these two cases, economic factors were not the main motivation.

Several factors support the respondents' views on the relative insignificance of economic and financial factors. The suicide bombers were class-heterogeneous, and the proportion of them who were poor or unemployed was not much different from the corresponding proportion in the population. Based on the occupations of family members, their assets and their annual income, I asked respondents to classify their family economically before the suicide attack. Thirty-seven sets of respondents answered this question. They were given five options (corresponding percentages in parentheses): poor (8 percent), a little below average (24 percent), average (30 percent), a little above average (19 percent), and well-to-do (19 percent). With 32 percent of families seeing themselves as below average and 38 percent as above average, we must regard the economic profile of suicide bombers' families as quite similar to that of the entire Palestinian population. I also asked respondents about the occupations of the bombers before their death. Their occupations were diverse. Only 5 percent were unemployed, compared to a Palestinian unemployment rate of 26 percent during the period 2003-05 (The Palestinian Strategic Report; 2005: 213).

Forty-six percent of suicide bombers came from cities, 34 percent from villages and 20 percent from refugee camps. Palestinians consider refugees to be a low status group, but the percentage of suicide bombers from refugee camps as well those who are refugees but moved to live outside the camp (31 percent) was lower among the suicide bombers than the corresponding percentage in the population, which exceeds 40 percent (The Palestinian Strategic Report; 2008: 328). On average, West Bank residents enjoy better economic and social conditions than Gaza

residents do, but only 22 percent of the suicide bombers came from Gaza, fewer in percentage terms than the number of Gaza residents in the Palestinian population (about 30 percent).

Suicide bombers' families received financial compensation after the suicide attack. The suicide bombers' organizations usually gave some money, with the amount varying by organization and the family's financial need. Various Islamic and Palestinian charities helped too. From 2000 to 2003, Saddam Hussein contributed a lump sum to the family of each suicide bomber – initially, US \$10,000, rising to US \$25,000 in February 2002. However, these sums did not come close to covering the families' losses, including in many cases its main provider, its home (typically destroyed by the Israeli army), and so on.

To see whether financial compensation had any effect on the motivations of the bombers, family members were first asked whether the bomber was completely or partly financially dependent on his or her family or whether he or she was a provider. In 56 percent of cases, the bomber was either the main provider or one of the providers for his or her family. Moreover, in some cases, the bomber provided not only for his nuclear family but also for his or her extended family. In 38 percent of cases, the bomber was completely or partly dependent on his or her family financially. In two cases, the bomber was neither dependent nor a provider. However, if we take into account that 40 percent of the bombers were students, and the great majority of them were men, we see that the actual and potential percentage of providers was very high indeed. I conclude that suicide bombers caused their families considerable financial hardship, even after receiving a lump sum payment or a pension after the attack.

Another way of examining whether the family benefited financially from the suicide attack is by comparing home ownership before the suicide attack with home ownership at the time of the interview. To deter suicide bombers, Israel tried to “lessen the [financial] incentive effects by inflicting heavy costs posthumously on the martyrs' families, and from July 2002 they began to systematically destroy houses of martyrs' families [immediately after the suicide attack]” (Ricolfi, 2005: 113). Significantly, before the suicide attacks, 82 percent of the families of suicide bombers that I interviewed owned their house or apartment. That figure dropped to 56 percent when asked about their current residence. Thus, about a quarter of the families in the sample did not have enough financial resources to rebuild their homes after the Israeli army destroyed them. Moreover, even in cases where families rebuilt their homes, financial compensation for the suicide bombing was typically insufficient for reconstruction. The cost of

building a house in Palestine is typically between US \$20,000 and US \$50,000. Not unusually, therefore, the father of suicide bomber Ibraheem Naji had to sell a plot of land to cover his expenses.

I must also note that 62 percent of the bodies of the suicide bombers in my sample were interred in special military cemeteries inside Israel. For a family to obtain the body for burial in Palestine, it had to hire a lawyer and pay between US \$5,000 and US \$20,000 to the lawyer and the Israeli government. Many of the bombers' bodies are in fact still in the hand of the Israelis because their families cannot afford to recover them. Most of the families I interviewed incurred still more costs. Immediately after a suicide attack, the Israeli army typically surrounded the family's house, gave it short notice to leave, sometimes before having a chance to remove personal belongings, arrested the bomber's male relatives (to take DNA samples, collect information about the bomber, and make sure that family members did not help the bomber), and imposed a curfew on the whole village or town. Finally, in several cases family members lost their jobs permanently. For example, the Israelis revoked the permit of the father of suicide bomber Mohammed Atallah, which allowed him to drive a taxi from Nablus to Ramallah. The family's main source of income thus disappeared overnight.

In sum, the evidence does not support the argument that financial incentives motivated suicide bombers. More convincing interpretations of the motivations of suicide bombers are based on religion, strategic considerations, and retaliation for state repression.

### ***State Repression***

As Table 1 shows, taking revenge because of an Israeli action – against the bomber, somebody he or she knew, or the Palestinians in general – was the principal motivation for 67 percent of suicide bombers, the secondary motivation for 29 percent, and the tertiary motivation for 10 percent. Only one suicide bomber in my sample was *not* motivated at all by Israeli state repression. Even that bomber (the police officer to whom I referred earlier) had a long history with Israeli repression. He spent eight years in Israeli prison due to involvement in the first *intifada* and was twice injured by Israeli bullets.

The case of Iyad al-Masri was typical. He was a 17-year-old suicide bomber from Nablus who blew himself up to avenge the death of his 15-year-old brother and his 14-year-old first



cousin. Iyad was with his brother when the latter was shot by an Israeli soldier. He was eager for revenge and blew himself up just nine days after his brother's death.

Another example is Hebah Duragmeh, a 19-year-old university student majoring in English literature, who blew herself up in an Israeli shopping mall in Afula, killing four people. Hebah was strongly affected by what had happened to her 23-year-old brother, Bakir, and the rest of her family. According to her mother, Bakir "was not only Heba's brother but also her best friend." He was first seriously injured during a demonstration against the Israeli occupation. As a result, he had to spend almost a year in hospital, including 40 days in a coma. He lost part of his liver. After he was released from hospital, Bakir became more aggressive and was involved in military activities against the Israelis. Eventually, he was arrested and sentenced to 99 years in prison. The Israeli military court also decided that the family's house would be destroyed. According to Hebah's mother, her daughter blew herself up as a reaction to what the Israeli soldiers did to the family. "Hebah used to wonder how her brother, Bakir, lives in the prison; what he eats, what he wears, and how he feels about spending the rest of his life there... I remember one day after visiting Bakir in his prison, she became very angry after hearing how he was tortured by the Israelis. Hebah was also strongly affected by what the [Israeli] soldiers did when they came to destroy our house. It was so big...530 square metres... They threw our clothes on the floor and then poured olive oil on them and on the couches... They destroyed Hebah's school notebooks days before her final exams..... Hebah, who was the best student in her class, worked hard to achieve an average that would enable her to win a scholarship.... All that affected her average significantly as well as her chances of getting a scholarship. They also attached dynamite to the roots of the trees in our back yard and destroyed the trees she took care of.... Among the things that hurt her most was seeing me sitting on the ground crying near the rubble of our house, not knowing where to go."

Several suicide bombers were influenced by Israeli actions not against them or immediate family members but against other Palestinians whom they knew. For example, Sa'r Hunanee, a member of the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), blew himself up to avenge two other PFLP members whom he knew and who were assassinated by Israeli forces. According to his mother, Sa'r "was also affected by what happened to Samer al-Wahdan. Samer was injured during clashes with the Israelis.... Due to his injury, Samer was lying on the street when an Israeli jeep drove over his legs and body several times.... Sa'r, who saw what happened,

could not sleep for days....He used to wake up during the night calling Samer's name and telling him that he will save him."

In other cases, the bomber did not personally know the Palestinians whom he avenged. Such was the case of Inad Shokeirat. This suicide bomber was by chance among the first to see the body parts of five Palestinian activists assassinated by the Israeli army in an apartment in Nablus. He told his brother "it was obvious that these men were tortured before they were executed. Also there were signs of dog bites on their bodies." Other bombers were influenced by what they saw on TV. After watching the news about the massacre in Jenin Refugee Camp, where more than 50 Palestinians were killed, Abdalkareem Thaineh asked his mother: "How can I sleep, mother, while they kill and murder our people?"

Finally, several cases of suicide bombers were affected at least partly by Israeli repression in earlier periods, confirming Zwerman's and Steinhoff's (2005:102) view that "repression may have serious long-term" effects and "may be borne by the state for decades after its apparent end." For example, Hashim al-Nujar, an MA student and Hamas's first suicide bomber in the West Bank during the second *intifada*, had witnessed the massacre of 29 Palestinian by Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein in a Hebron mosque in 1993 (an event Palestinians often link to the their first suicide bombing campaign, which preceded the second *intifada*). According to Hashim's sister, her brother, who was 17 when the massacre took place, helped transfer the wounded to nearby hospitals. He also lost one of his best friends in the massacre. Since that event, he "always felt that he will eventually be killed by the Jews [Israelis]. He wanted to make his death so costly." Another bomber, Mahmoud al-Qwasmī, who blew himself up on 5 March 2003, killing fifteen Israeli civilians in Haifa, witnessed the Hebron mosque massacre at the age of 10.

Similarly, Raed Misk, who killed 23 Israeli civilians, hated the Israelis deeply because of what happened to his mother when he was fifteen years old. Misk was in an Israeli prison when his mother died the morning of her biweekly visit. Although she died from natural causes, Misk held the Israelis responsible for separating him from his mother when he was a teenager, worsening her condition. According to his brother and sister-in-law, his mother's death changed him forever. Misk and some other bombers from Hebron, such as Mujahed al-Ju'bery, were also affected by the brutal killing of a Palestinian child by Israeli forces. According to Raed's brother, Israeli soldiers approached four Palestinian children and forced them to draw lots. On each piece

of paper an instruction was written – “break my hand,” “shoot my legs,” “throw me from a jeep,” and the like. “The unlucky child, the brother of Raed’s student, chose ‘throw me from a jeep.’” Ejected face down from the speeding military vehicle, the child died immediately.

The strong effect of harsh Israeli repression on Palestinian suicide bombers is also evident from the fact that most of the bombers experienced Israeli repression firsthand. For example, I found that 74 percent of the bombers in my sample had been arrested or injured by Israeli forces, lost close relatives or their home because of Israeli action, or were eyewitnesses to a massacre or an assassination instigated by Israel.

Finally, respondents were asked to describe the level of involvement of their family, clan (*hamuleh*), settlement (city, village, or refugee camp), and district in the struggle against the Israeli occupation in comparison with other families, clans, settlements, and districts in the West Bank and Gaza. Most respondents considered that involvement relatively high or above average. This is also an indicator that suicide bombers tended to come from social settings that experienced an unusually high level of repression.

We now turn to an examination of the effects of religion, the second most important motivator for suicide attacks.

### ***Religion***

Religion was the main motivation for 24 percent of bombers in my sample, a secondary motivation for 48 percent, and a tertiary motivation for 5 percent. Religion played some role in motivating two-thirds of the suicide bombers in my sample. The case of Na’el Abu-Hleal is typical. According to his father, Na’el “cared about the afterlife more than this life... He was known for his love of martyrdom....[For example,] during the first *intifada*, Na’el planned to stab an Israeli soldier...He changed his mind at the last minute to avoid hurting a [Palestinian] mother and her daughter who were passing by when he was about to approach the soldier.” When he was asked, days before his death, about his plans to get married, he replied: “I do not want to marry a woman from this life but women from the afterlife [the 72 virgins promised to martyrs in the Koran].” Na’el was strictly religious most of his life, which he lived modestly. He used to lead people in prayer (a task usually undertaken by sheikhs) and memorized the whole Qur’an. Na’el, who only shaved his beard on the day of the attack to avoid being noticed by the Israelis (since wearing a beard is a sign of religiosity), was seen praying in a mosque just hours

before he executed his suicide attack. Another example of this religious type of suicide bomber was Fadee Amer. Fadee was devout since childhood and earned several certificates in reading the Qur'an. According to his sister, he was the "most religious person on our street... he used to go with al-Da'wa men [religious activists who travel from town to town to spread Islam and remind Muslims to practice their religion] to urge people to become more religious." Before becoming a Hamas member, Fadee was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. His sister and mother heard him many times saying that a martyr can help 72 of his relatives in the afterlife and in heaven he will marry the women who are waiting for him.

Not surprisingly, religious belief figured much more prominently in the motivation of suicide bombers attached to Islamicist organizations (Hamas and PIJ) than in the motivation of suicide bombers attached to secular organizations (Fatah and PFLP) (see Table 2).

– Table 2 about here –

### ***Strategic Motivations***

"Liberating the homeland" was mentioned as a motivation in just over half the cases in my sample. However, none of the bombers' families said that liberating Palestine was the bomber's main motive. It was the secondary motivation in five cases, and the tertiary motivation in sixteen cases. For instance, Maher Hubiehseh blew himself up in Haifa, killing eighteen Israeli civilians. He devoted part of his last Will to urging Palestinians to stop negotiating with the Israelis and adopt the way of resistance and *jihad* because it is the "only way" to "liberate Palestine and Jerusalem." Maher's principal motivation, however, was to avenge the assassination of Hamas's West Bank leaders Jamal Mansour and Jamal Sleem. Maher, who had an appointment with the two leaders, was taken to the hospital because he was in shock after seeing their bodies as well as the bodies of three other people killed as "collateral damage" during the Israeli operation. Similarly, in his Will, Nubeel al-Ur'eer, the second *intifada*'s first suicide bomber, urged the Palestinians to continue the path of *intifada*, suicide bombing, and *jihad* until they "recover their right and land." He also reminded his people that, "as you have seen, this peace [the peace process with the Israelis] brought nothing to us. We have not achieved any of our demands....Continue the *intifada* until we defeat the enemy and force it to leave our land."

## *Conclusion*

The motivations of Palestinian suicide bombers were typically complex. They drew mainly on the desire for revenge against the harsh repressive measures of Israeli forces and, secondarily, on religious inspiration. The effects of harsh Israeli state repression were very strong, figuring at least partly in 95 percent of my sample. Religious motivations varied by organization, with bombers recruited by Islamicist organizations tending to be more strongly influenced by religious factors than were bombers recruited by secular organizations. Strategic calculation – the assessment that suicide bombing would hasten the liberation of the homeland – was not the principal motivation for any of the bombers in my sample but was a secondary or tertiary motivation for about half of them. Material incentives, economic necessity, exploitation of individual by unscrupulous organizations, and psychopathology were largely irrelevant as motivators.

My analysis has profound theoretical implications for the study of suicide bombers. Most researchers in the field argue for the importance of strategic calculation, religious fanaticism or, less frequently, some other single factor as *the* cause of suicide bombing. I dispute such monocausal reasoning on three grounds. First, it tends to reduce social actors to dull calculating machines or fools strictly programmed by cultural demands – what Brym and Hamlin (2009) call “rational fools” or “cultural dopes.” The actors I examined were neither. They struggled to navigate the political opportunities they confronted, make sense of the culture in which they were embedded, and map out the course of action that made the most sense to them under the circumstances they had to deal with. The second problem with monocausal reasoning is that it ignores that Palestinian suicide bombers were typically prompted to act by *multiple* social forces. Paying attention to only one of them robs them of their complexity as social actors. Finally, monocausal thinkers have focused so tightly on religion and strategic calculation that they have largely ignored what I have found to be the single most important factor motivating Palestinian suicide bombers: harsh state repression, which creates a widespread desire for violent revenge. This desire that may be held in abeyance for a time, but it seems always capable of percolating to the surface as long as harsh state repression persists.

The foregoing considerations suggest the need for nothing less than a reorientation of the study of suicide bombers – a reorientation that recognizes the fundamental humanity of the people who commit these horrific acts, the complexity of the forces that drive them, and the

importance of the interaction between them and their enemies in the patterning of their behaviour.

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Motivation	State repression	Religion	Liberation of the homeland	Economic factors	Social factors	Mental illness	Exploitation	Unknown	Total
Primary	28 (67)	10 (24)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2)	1 (2)	2 (5)	42 (100)
Secondary	9 (29)	15 (48)	5 (16)	1 (3)	1 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	31 (99*)
Tertiary	2 (10)	1 (5)	16 (76)	1 (5)	1 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	21 (101*)
Total	39 (41)	26 (28)	21 (22)	2 (2)	2 (2)	1 (1)	1 (1)	2 (2)	94 (99)*

\*Does not equal 100 because of rounding.

Motivation Organization	Avenge repression	Religious belief	Liberation of homeland	Exploitation	Mental illness	Unknown	Total	n
Hamas	58	42	0	0	0	0	100	19
PIJ	69	15	0	8	8	0	100	13
Fatah	80	0	0	0	0	20	100	5
PFLP	100	0	0	0	0	0	100	2
Fatah/PFLP	100	0	0	0	0	0	100	1
Fatah/PIJ	100	0	0	0	0	0	100	1
Fatah/Hamas	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	1