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# Harsh State Repression as a Cause of Suicide Bombing: The Case of the Palestinian–Israeli Conflict

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*Although students of social movements have established that state repression strongly affects protesters' choice of tactics, this finding has been ignored by most analysts of suicide bombing. Based on data collected from various sources, including 88 interviews the author conducted in 2006 with senior leaders of six Palestinian political organizations and close relatives and friends of Palestinian suicide bombers, this article argues that harsh state repression is a major cause of suicide bombing. It shows that understanding the effect of state repression is crucial to clarifying many of the unsolved puzzles concerning the rationales of organizations that employ suicide bombing, the motivations of individual suicide bombers, and the reasons why this tactic has become popular in some societies. The article concludes that there are three types of organizational rationales underlying the use of suicide bombing. Suicide bombing may be an extreme reaction to extreme state repression, a combined reactive and strategic action, or a purely strategic action. Different contexts and organizations typify these organizational rationales.*

## Introduction

On 11 November 1982, a car bomb crashed into Israeli military headquarters in Tyre, southern Lebanon, killing 75 Israeli soldiers and 15 Palestinian and Lebanese prisoners.<sup>1</sup> The attack, carried out by the Shi'ite organization Hezbollah a few months after the Israeli military invasion of Lebanon, was the first suicide attack by an Islamic organization against a foreign state in modern history. Since then, an increasing number of countries have experienced this extreme form of collective violence, either by becoming a target, a shelter for its perpetrators, or both.

Not surprisingly, suicide bombing has attracted the attention of many social scientists. Analysts tend to explain it as the result of the individual characteristics of suicide bombers,<sup>2</sup>

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the cultural factors that predispose them to commit such violent acts,<sup>3</sup> the presumably rational strategizing that leads them to conclude that suicide bombing often pays,<sup>4</sup> and the competition or “outbidding” of organizations that employ the tactic for popular support.<sup>5</sup> Most of these explanations are one-sided or “terrorist-centered.” They focus on the suicide bombers, their organizations, their culture, and so on, ignoring the effect of the target state’s repressive actions on the insurgent organizations’ choice of tactics and the magnitude of their suicide attacks. However, suicide bombing often appears in the context of political conflict between at least two parties (an insurgent organization versus a state). Therefore, any theory of suicide bombing that does not focus on the *interaction between insurgents and the target state* will be limited or misleading.

This article seeks to answer the following questions: Does Israeli repression during the second *intifada* or uprising (2000–05) significantly affect Palestinian suicide bombing? If so, then how? The article argues that understanding the effect of harsh state repression is crucial to clarifying many unsolved puzzles surrounding Palestinian suicide bombing. For example, the claim that suicide bombing is “a national liberation strategy” cannot fully explain why it is more popular among Palestinians in some periods than in others or why public support continues to be strong despite growing evidence that such tactic often work against strategic Palestinian goals. The same applies to the outbidding thesis, which fails to explain why Palestinian religious organizations employed suicide bombing in periods when the tactic was unpopular and why secular organizations waited more than a year during the second *intifada* before hopping aboard the suicide “bandwagon.” These and many other questions cannot be answered without recognizing the effects of harsh repression on suicide bombing.

The article begins by briefly reviewing major suicide bombing theories, focusing especially on the recent and popular arguments of Robert Pape and Mia Bloom. Because the effect of harsh state repression on suicide bombing has received scant attention in the terrorism literature, the article then turns to the social movements literature to examine what scholars in that field have found regarding the effect of repression on insurgent tactics. After outlining how the data was collected, the article proceeds to examine the effect of harsh Israeli state repression on Palestinian suicide bombing at three connected levels of analysis: macro (insurgent community), meso (organizations), and micro (individual bombers).

## Suicide Bombing Theories

In a recent literature review, Brym and Araj identify four major groups of theories of suicide bombing:<sup>6</sup>

1. *Theories of psychopathology* regard suicide bombers as irrational or unstable individuals with a death wish. However, research shows that theories of psychopathology are of no value in helping us understand the rising incidence of suicide bombing. In brief, the rate of psychopathology among suicide bombers does not seem to be higher than the corresponding rate in the general population, in part because psychologically abnormal people are weeded out for reasons of organizational security.<sup>7</sup>
2. *Deprivation theories* regard suicide bombers as motivated by poverty or unemployment. Again, however, research shows that suicide bombers are generally better off—sometimes much better off—than the populations from which they are recruited in terms of income, education, and other resources.<sup>8</sup> The data collected by the present author on a representative sample of Palestinian suicide bombers does not

support either the psychopathology or deprivation theories. It was found that among the 43 Palestinian suicide bombers studied, only one had suffered from any form of mental illness. It was also discovered that considerable class heterogeneity exists among suicide bombers; they did not tend to be especially poor or disproportionately unemployed.

3. *Cultural theories*, such as the “clash of civilizations” thesis, hold that Islamic culture promotes violent hatred of all things occidental.<sup>9</sup> Yet public opinion polls show that Arabs in the Middle East hold favorable attitudes toward most aspects of American culture. They are negatively predisposed only toward American Middle East policy. They strongly disagree politically with the United States in some respects, but they are sympathetic to American culture in general.<sup>10</sup> It is also significant that among the 83 percent of suicide attackers between 1980 and 2003 for whom data on ideological background is available, only 43 percent were religious.<sup>11</sup> In short, while some cultural resources likely increase the probability that some groups will engage in suicide attacks, one must be careful not to exaggerate their significance.
4. In comparison with the preceding explanations of suicide bombing, Robert Pape’s recently proposed *rational choice theory* is a major step forward. Pape argues that suicide terrorism is “primarily an extreme national liberation strategy used against foreign occupiers with a democratic political system.”<sup>12</sup> Arguably, therefore, suicide attacks tend to occur in clusters as part of a campaign by organized groups to achieve a political goal, and they are often successful. However, Brym and Araj’s analysis of the second *intifada* shows that strategic thinking is often overshadowed by the desire for revenge and retaliation in the planning of suicide attacks. Moreover, suicide bombing caused the Israeli state to reoccupy Palestinian population centers and build a wall that incorporates substantial West Bank territory within Israel: just the opposite of the result predicted by rational choice theory.

A second rational choice approach is Mia Bloom’s *outbidding thesis*, which proposes that suicide attacks are a currency for outbidding rivals in the competition for popular support. From this perspective, terrorist groups “use suicide bombing under two conditions: when other terrorist or military tactics fail and when they are in competition with other terrorist groups for popular/financial support.”<sup>13</sup> However, subsequent research shows that public opinion data are inconsistent with the outbidding thesis. During the second *intifada*, suicide attacks by militant organizations were not followed by an increase in popular support for those organizations.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, much of the suicide bombing literature either ignores the effect of harsh state repression or dismisses it. True, Pape notes in passing that “harsh occupation policies” can “drive up the level of suicide terrorism once it occurs.” But he also emphasizes that “there is no strong relationship between the level of harm suffered by the occupied community and the level of suicide terrorism”<sup>15</sup> To her credit, Bloom notes that harsh state repression may increase public support for suicide bombing.<sup>16</sup> Yet by regarding public opinion as the decisive variable influencing the frequency of suicide attacks, she ignores the effect of repression on insurgent organizations. This is no small matter in an era when an increasing number of suicide attacks are highly *unpopular* among Muslims because they are directed at Muslims and Islamic governments.

The article now turns to what students of social movements' have found regarding the effects of harsh state repression on insurgent tactics.

### **The Social Movement Literature: The Repression/Protest Nexus**

Suicide bombing is arguably the most extreme form of protest insofar as it requires the death of the protester and aims to inflict maximum damage on the target state or government. Since students of social movements have been investigating the relationship between harsh state repression and protest for three decades, students of suicide bombing can learn much from this body of literature.

The social movement literature is full of claims and counter-claims about the relationship between protest and repression. Deprivation and relative deprivation theory, rational choice theory, the theory of collective action, and resource mobilization theory make different predictions about the effects of repression on political protest.<sup>17</sup> The results of empirical research have been inconsistent as well. Some studies have found that repression decreases protest whereas others have found a positive effect of repression on protest. After reviewing the research, Davenport recently concluded that when confronted by harsh state repression, dissidents have been found to run away, fight harder, and alternatively run away or fight harder according to political-economic context.<sup>18</sup> Zimmerman noted years ago that "there are theoretical arguments for all conceivable basic relationships between government coercion and group protest and rebellion, except for no relationship."<sup>19</sup>

Despite the contradictory theoretical predictions and empirical findings, most scholars in this area agree on several issues. One is of central importance to the subject of this article: harsh state repression affects protester's choice of tactics.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, most of the studies conducted in countries under foreign control or occupation (including three studies about the Palestinians) showed that massacres, excessive use of live ammunition against demonstrations, and so on have a strong radicalizing effect on insurgent tactics. In a study focusing on the cognitive processes that occur as people move from supporting peaceful to violent protest, White found that harsh state repression was the major determinant of IRA violence and that it introduced new grievances.<sup>21</sup> Khawaja found positive relationships between most forms of state repression (including harsh forms such as dispersion by force and shooting) and collective action in his analysis of the West Bank between 1976 and 1985. Instead of deterring protest, Khawaja concludes, repression increased subsequent collective action and reinforced popular resistance.<sup>22</sup> Francisco studied the interaction between Palestinian protest and Israeli state coercion during the first two years of the first *intifada* (1987–1989). His study also included two other cases with "high levels of coercion and a dissatisfied populace," the former German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia. One of his findings was that the backlash hypothesis is supported weakly in the GDR and strongly in Palestine. Palestinians "continued to protest even under extremely harsh coercion."<sup>23</sup> In another study of ten instances of massacres by a state or foreign military occupation representing most of the best-known massacres in the twentieth century, Francisco found that extreme levels of state violence generally provoke a backlash of mobilization. He also maintains that dissidents do not perceive harsh state repression such as massacres as an indication of state strength and thus a deterrent, but as a sign of state weakness and therefore an opportunity. Francisco also noted that foreign military occupation by democratic countries does not necessarily imply democratic governance in colonies.<sup>24</sup> Finally, in a study of the two Palestinian *intifadas*, Beitler showed how Israeli countermeasures in the West Bank and Gaza affected the Palestinian choice of tactics over

twenty years of occupation. She noted that during the first *intifada*, Israel's repression of Palestinians' relatively ineffective, nonviolent tactics lowered the overall level of conflict activity but increased the violent aspects. This phenomenon, according to Beitler, partly explains why the second *intifada* turned to higher levels of violence. It also supports Lichbach's hypothesis: the repression of a group's less violent tactics will increase the use of more violent tactics over time.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, while the effect of harsh state repression on suicide bombing has received scant attention in the terrorism literature, most students of social movements agree that it affects protesters' choice of tactic; and most students of social movements who study protest in countries under foreign control or occupation have found that harsh state repression typically has a strong positive effect on protest. This article bridges the gap between these two literatures by attempting to answer the following questions: (1) Does Israeli repression significantly affect Palestinian Suicide bombing? (2) If so, then how? As will be shown, answers to these questions help clarify why insurgents employ suicide bombing in the first place.

## Methodology

The total number of Palestinians who were killed during the first 3 years of the second *intifada* is not an adequate measure of repression if one wants to study a 39-year military occupation (Pape).<sup>26</sup> Any serious examination of such effects must include other types of harsh repression and must take into account the effects of repression used in earlier periods since "repression may have serious long-term" effects and "may be borne by the state for decades after its apparent end."<sup>27</sup> In addition, even if one examines the most recent period, it is necessary to describe *who* was killed. For example, according to the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (b'Tselem,) the source of Pape's data regarding the Palestinian case, 803 children were killed by Israeli forces during the second *intifada*, and this fact seems to be a source of particular rage on the part of the Palestinian population. It is also necessary to examine *how* people were killed; b'Tselem's website shows that 210 individuals were assassinated while 339 others died as "collateral damage" during these operations—again, apparently a source of special rage.<sup>28</sup>

To avoid such measurement deficiencies, this article examines the effect of harsh state repression on Palestinian suicide bombers, their organizations, and their society by employing the historical approach, recommended by many students of state repression.<sup>29</sup> But how can one "capture the complexity" of large episodes such as those that occurred during the second *intifada*? As Tilly and Tarrow note, one "can learn a lot from what activists say or later write about their activities" and one can also examine "what activists *do* during major episodes of contention" through newspaper records, archives, and online press releases.<sup>30</sup> This article presents data about what activists say (from the author's in-depth interviews) *and* what activists do (from a database of collective violence events that Robert Brym and the author created in 2005).<sup>31</sup> The article also uses other external sources such as newspapers, archives, public opinion polls, and findings of previous studies (including four studies conducted about Palestinian suicide bombers and two other studies by Israeli researchers that examined the involvement of Palestinian organizations in suicide bombing). By comparing what activists say with what they do, the article will better be able to assess the validity of the author's data.

The author completed 88 interviews averaging more than 90 minutes each in the spring and summer of 2006. They include 45 interviews with senior leaders of the most influential

and active Palestinian political organizations (about seven from each organization), four of which ( Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Fatah, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) have actually employed suicide bombing. Of these four, the first two are religious and the last two are secular. Other insurgent organizations (the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the former communist party, the Palestinian People's Party) did not use that tactic.

The author also conducted 43 interviews with close relatives and friends of suicide bombers, randomly selected from the pool of 173 Palestinian suicide bombers during the second *intifada* and representing about one-quarter of all Palestinian suicide bombers during the period 2000–05. Almost all of the interviews took place in the homes of the suicide bombers, which gave the author an opportunity to obtain much additional material, such as dozens of videotapes and last letters that suicide bombers left behind as well as more than 600 photographs. These supplementary materials help to assess the accuracy of some answers and provide a deeper understanding of the social, political, and economic background of the bombers. At least 4 close relatives and friends of each of the 43 cases were interviewed in 2 different sessions. This technique allowed the author to obtain comprehensive and triangulated information about each case.

The author conducted 68 interviews in the West Bank. A trained, experienced, and closely supervised assistant conducted 20 in Gaza. All interviews were digitally recorded. To ensure a high level of confidentiality; each interview was uploaded to a server at the University of Toronto immediately after completion and deleted from the digital recorder the same day. The author developed the questionnaires with Robert Brym and the instruments were pre-tested on three Palestinian leaders and on four close relatives of suicide bombers.

### Three Levels of Analysis

The effect of harsh state repression on Palestinian suicide bombing can be best understood when analyzed on the macro, meso, and micro levels because “an explanation at one level of analysis is dependent on variables at another level of analysis.”<sup>32</sup> The article turns first to the macro level.

#### *The Macro Level: Insurgent Society*

The second *intifada*, triggered by the visit of Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount or Haram al-Sharif on 28 September 2000, took Palestinian leaders by surprise.<sup>33</sup> During the first weeks of the second *intifada*, Palestinian protest was mainly similar to that used during the first *intifada*, involving demonstrations, marches, stone-throwing, and so on. During the first few months of the second *intifada* there were no successful suicide attacks and only four failed attacks against military targets that did not lead to any Israeli deaths.<sup>34</sup> The “first ‘real’ suicide attack did not occur until 4 March 2001, when a bus in Netanya inside Israel was attacked (three people were killed and fifty wounded).”<sup>35</sup> Despite that, the Israeli army fired on Palestinian demonstrators with live ammunition, killing and seriously injuring tens of people daily. According to Palestinian medical estimates, “approximately 48 percent of Palestinians killed were shot in the head or neck.” This was interpreted by many Palestinians as indicating that “Israeli soldiers were shooting to kill.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the Israelis started using Apache helicopters, F-15 aircraft, and tanks to attack Palestinian population centers. Finally, on 9 November 2000, Israel started its assassination campaign. In the words of one analyst: “As the Israelis themselves admit . . . the first months of the

intifada were characterized by the harshness of the Israeli retaliation and by the weakness of the Palestinian response. While in the entire al-Aqsa intifada the ratio of Palestinian victims to Israelis was around three to one, in the first three months (up to December 2000) the ratio was ten to one."<sup>37</sup>

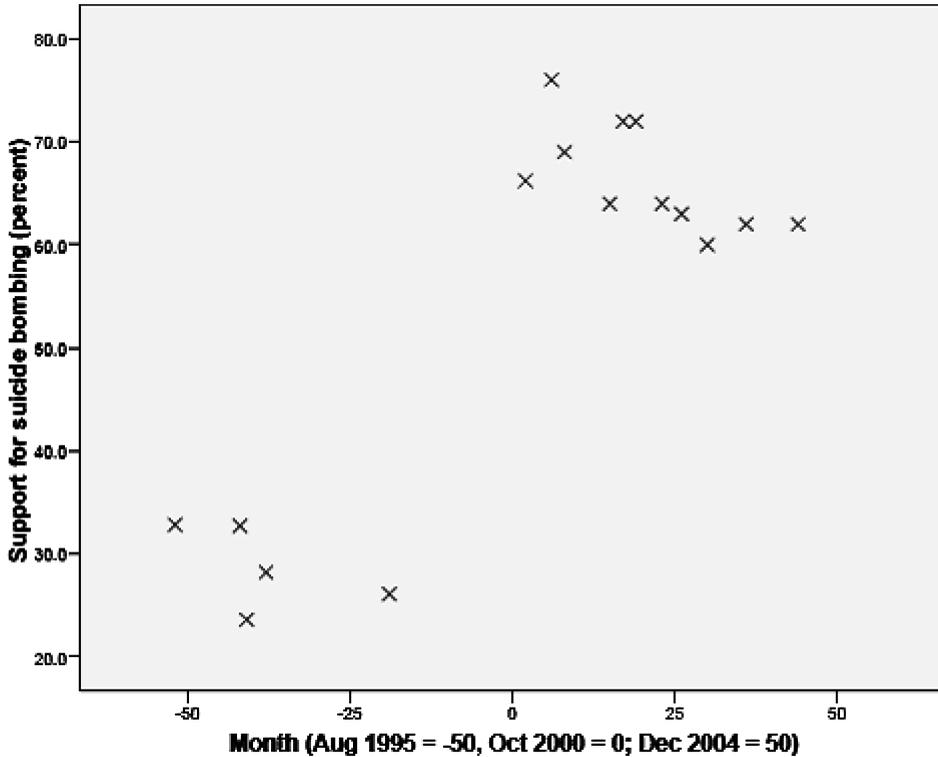
Israel employed such a harsh policy from the very beginning for three reasons. First, from the Israeli perspective, the Palestinians started the *intifada* two months after the failure of a serious attempt to find a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. At Camp David, the Israeli government was willing to make the biggest concessions ever, so the *intifada* presumably showed “bad faith on the part of the Palestinians and determination to gain advantage through violence.” Therefore, “a commensurate response was necessary to defend Israel.”<sup>38</sup> Second, the leaders of the Israeli army who were not happy with the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon on 22 May 2000 wanted to show that the army was not weak and was still able to deter enemies.<sup>39</sup> Third, the first months of the *intifada* were election months in Israel, and election battles in Israel “are periods of security escalation.”<sup>40</sup> Prime Minister Barak wanted to show the Israeli public that his policies toward the Palestinians were no softer than those of his rival, Sharon.

Harsh Israeli repression during the first three months of the second *intifada* had a significant impact on Palestinian public support for suicide bombing. As Figure 1 shows, in March 1999, the last poll taken by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center before the uprising began, 26.1 percent of Palestinians supported suicide bombing against Israel. By December 2000, three months after the outbreak of the *intifada*, the figure jumped to 66 percent.

Pape and others might argue that the significant change in Palestinian public opinion in the fall of 2000 was due to two strategic factors: the failure of peace negotiations in Camp David in July 2000 and the successful example of Hizballah attacks, which caused Israel to withdraw from Lebanon in May of that year. Although these two factors are relevant, they cannot on their own explain the significant change in Palestinian public support in such a short period.

First, Hizballah’s main tactic in the mid to late 1990s was not suicide bombing. It was the guerrilla attack. Moreover, Hizballah’s guerrilla attacks did not target Israeli civilians. They targeted only Israeli military forces.<sup>41</sup> Second, although it is reasonable to assume that the failure of the peace process and the success of the Hizballah resistance sent the signal that resistance can be more effective than negotiations, resistance for Palestinians did not necessarily mean suicide bombing. Non-suicide guerrilla attacks had been the favored tactic for many years, and relatively nonviolent tactics such as those used during the first *intifada* (1987–93) had led to the peace process and Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian areas in 1994. The quick rise in Palestinian support for suicide bombing is thus a mystery from the point of view of rational choice theory.

Palestinian support for suicide bombing surged in 2000 mainly because of the severity of Israeli repression, which had an enormous impact on many average Palestinians. Simply put, angry Palestinian urged insurgents to attack Israeli civilians in the third month of the *intifada* mainly because most of the casualties of Israeli repression were Palestinian civilians. In the following years, Israeli harsh polices continued and intensified, especially after Sharon took office in March 2001,<sup>42</sup> and after the attacks of 11 September 2001, when the White House gave Sharon *carte blanche*.<sup>43</sup> Harsh state repression was a major factor behind the significant increase in Palestinian public support for suicide bombing in the first few months of the *intifada*, and ongoing repression under Sharon’s government (2001–05) played a major role in keeping support high (never below 50 percent). It was also one factor, among others, behind Hamas’s sweeping victory in the Palestinian elections in



**Figure 1.** Palestinian public support for suicide bombing (August 1995–December 2004). Source: “Palestine Opinion Pulse,” accessed on the website of the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center at <http://jmcc.org/publicpoll/opinion.html>, 14 November 2005.

January 2006. It became abundantly clear to the Palestinians that suicide bombing had a radicalizing effect on Israeli public opinion, but support for suicide bombing nonetheless continued. This shows that the central mechanism suggested by Pape (terrorists target the civilians of a democratic state to mobilize them to put pressure on their government to withdraw its forces) is working—but in the opposite direction, meaning that suicide bombing could be seen by its supporters and has been used by its perpetrator not only as a way of pushing the other society but also punishing it.

Public support increased the motivations of radical organizations to carry out suicide attacks, made it difficult for moderate leaders and organizations to strongly condemn such tactic, turned bombers into heroes, and thus encouraged more people to volunteer for suicide missions. However, the effect of harsh state repression on the organizational and individual levels was not only indirect (through its effect on the larger public). As the next sections demonstrate, it has direct effects too.

### *The Meso Level: Insurgent Organizations*

The effect of harsh state repression at the meso level can be observed in Palestinian insurgent organizations’ choice of tactics and the internal conflict between “radicals” and “moderates” within each organization. Each of these two issues will be discussed in turn.

*Choice of Tactics.* Leaders were asked about the factors that affect their organization's choice of tactics. Thirty of the 36 respondents who answered the question said that the most important factor was Israeli repressive policies and actions against the Palestinians. The six other leaders perceived Israeli repression as the second, third, or fourth most important factor.

The strong perceived effect of harsh state repression does not mean that all organizations reacted to it in the same way. In particular, one may distinguish the reactions of religious organizations from those of secular organizations.

*Religious Organizations.* Palestinian suicide bombings have occurred in two main waves: 1993–97 and 2000–2005. Suicide bombings during first wave were carried out only by religious organizations: Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. All fifteen religious leaders (seven from Hamas and eight from Palestinian Islamic Jihad) in the present sample responded to the question, “Why did your organization adopt suicide bombing for the first time in 1993?” Their replies fell into one of three categories:

1. Seven leaders said that the main reason their organization first engaged in suicide bombing was because of the harsh way in which Israeli authorities dealt with the first intifada.
2. Six leaders listed strategic factors as first in order of importance. For example, it became clear to some leaders that other violent methods were neither possible nor effective. Others said that their organizations adopted suicide bombing because the method proved successful in Lebanon during the 1980s and early 1990s. Palestinian Islamic Jihad leaders tended to emphasize strategic reasons more than Hamas leaders did.
3. The two remaining leaders mentioned specific opportunities and threats as the most important factor that led their organizations to adopt suicide bombing as a tactic. Such opportunities and threats included the deportation of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad activists to Lebanon in 1992, which allowed them to learn suicide bombing techniques in Hizballah training camps; and the fear that the peace process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority would succeed and thus undermine “Palestinians’ historic rights.”<sup>44</sup>

In short, out of the 15 leaders from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, 7 maintained that harsh state repression was the main factor behind the adoption of suicide bombing, 6 held that strategic factors were most important, and 2 mentioned specific opportunities and threats as the most important factor.

Other questions were asked about organizational rationales for suicide bombing to examine the consistency of replies. For example, at the end of the interview, respondents were asked about whether their organizations perceive suicide bombing as a strategy or a tactic, and about its specific and main aims (to “liberate Palestine” or the West Bank and Gaza Strip, stop Israeli attacks against Palestinian civilians and/or the respondent’s organization, and so on). Answers to these questions revealed not only significant differences between religious and secular organizations, but also that both logics (reactive and strategic) co-existed within each religious organization and that suicide bombing is more strategic for Palestinian Islamic Jihad than Hamas. Thus, among the six leaders from Hamas who answered this question, only one leader chose the “strategic” option, one said that it is both strategic and reactive, and three leaders chose the “reactive” option alone. In contrast, five of the eight Palestinian Islamic Jihad leaders viewed suicide bombing as a strategic means to “liberate Palestine or the West Bank and Gaza Strip.” The remaining three Palestinian Islamic Jihad leaders viewed suicide bombing as a tactic that aims mainly

to stop Israeli attacks against Palestinian civilians and their organization. Consider the following responses of two of the most influential leaders of Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the West Bank and Gaza:

Through military and martyrdom operations, we jeopardize the security theory which is vital to the Zionist entity; we make them [Israelis] feel unsafe on our land and that they have to leave; also we send a clear message to the Jews who are thinking about immigrating to the Zionist entity: you will never feel safe on the land of Palestine. (Abdullah al-Shami)<sup>45</sup>

Martyrdom operations for the Islamic Jihad Movement are not a constant policy but came in response to the crimes and massacres committed by Israel against Palestinian civilians and leaders. We expressed our readiness more than once to cease our martyrdom operations against Israeli civilians if the Israelis stop targeting our civilians in return; for example in 2004 we accepted a truce that was suggested by Abu Mazen [then Palestinian Prime Minister]. We also requested that civilians be excluded on both sides. We also accepted the truce in 2005 that was discussed in Cairo on one condition; that it would be mutual. However, Israel carried on its operations and assassinations such as the assassination of Lo'ai al-Sa'di [an Islamic Jihad leader in the West Bank] in Jenin. (Khaled al-Batsh)

Thus, even in the Palestinian organization with the strongest strategic logic underlying the use of suicide bombing, one leader (al-Shami) sees suicide bombing as a strategy that may lead, in one way or another, to the liberation of "historical Palestine" whereas for the other leader (al-Batsh) it is a reaction to harsh state repression. Al-Batsh's answer is similar to those of Hamas leaders, who tend to perceive suicide bombing as reaction, not a strategy and who also maintained that their organization declared many times its readiness to stop suicide attacks if the Israelis stop targeting Palestinian civilians.<sup>46</sup>

*Secular Organizations.* None of the sixteen leaders from the two secular organizations that used suicide bombing (the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Fatah) perceived it as "a strategy to liberate Palestine or the West Bank and Gaza Strip." All seven leaders from the Popular Front and eight of the nine Fatah leaders said that their organizations used suicide bombing only as a reaction to Israeli attacks against Palestinian civilians and/or against their organization. In the words of Abu Husam, a senior leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine: "The Popular Front did not believe in this method: this method is still not part of our ideology, this is an immediate reaction to what we were subjected to, and came as a response to being directly targeted by the Israelis." Eight of the nine Fatah leaders in my sample and two of the leaders of the Popular Front said that they strongly oppose suicide bombing. Even the leaders who supported suicide bombing (four of the respondents from the Popular Front) said that their organization would stop suicide bombing if Israel stops its attacks against Palestinian civilians and their organization. Are these leaders telling the truth?

The best way to answer this question is by examining what actually happened. According to Brym and Araj's database of collective violence events, 82 percent of the 106 precipitants of suicide bombing they identified during the second *intifada* (the specific preceding events that affected the timing of the suicide bombings conducted by Palestinian organizations) were *reactive*. They were preceded by specific Israeli actions that elicited Palestinian reactions in the form of suicide attacks.<sup>47</sup> Thirty-four precipitants involved the assassination of organizational leaders and members, and 30 involved the killing of

**Table 1**  
Suicide bombers by organization (in percent)

Hamas	44
Fatah	32
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine	2
Palestinian Islamic Jihad	22
Total	100

Source: Brym and Araj (2006) database.

Palestinians other than organizational members. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, for example, never used suicide bombing before the assassination of its first leader. In October 2001, two months after the assassination of its Secretary-General, the Popular Front conducted its first suicide bombing and assassinated an Israeli cabinet minister. The latter action made most Popular Front leaders and activists wanted men as far as the Israeli army was concerned. That, in turn, encouraged them to become more involved in the violence of the second *intifada*. In total, the Popular Front conducted fewer than ten attacks. Most of them took place soon after an Israeli assassination of a leader or activist from the organization and were justified as such by the organization.

The same applies to Fatah, the leading secular Palestinian organization, which was responsible for almost 32 percent of all Palestinian suicide bombers during the second *intifada* (see Table 1). Fatah as a whole did not plan to resort to suicide bombing. Instead, the tactic was undertaken “from below” by Fatah’s local leaders as a reaction to Israel’s harsh actions against Palestinian civilians and the assassinations of some of Fatah’s activists, especially the January 2002 assassination of Fatah leader Raed Karmi. According to University of Tel Aviv political scientist Amal Jamal, one of the primary factors behind Fatah’s involvement in suicide bombing was that “Israel did not respect the red lines of not harming the civilian population and not targeting political leaders”<sup>48</sup> Another Israeli researcher concluded that Fatah activists “did not employ terrorism” from the outset of the *intifada*, instead they limited their actions to “a combination of mobilizing the population to a popular struggle through initiating massive demonstrations and confrontations, mainly employing cold weapons such as stones and Molotov Cocktails.” It was “the interactive violence between Israel and Tanzim activists that pushed the Tanzim along the slippery slope toward terrorism.”<sup>49</sup> My interviews with Fatah leaders support Jamal and Alimi’s conclusions. Eight of the nine Fatah leaders maintained that Fatah’s decision to use suicide bombing at the beginning of 2002 was not developed by the central leadership of Fatah but by Fatah’s “field and local leaders and activists” as a reaction to Israeli army violence. Moreover, they said that suicide bombing does not represent official Fatah policy. This issue is explained in depth in the following discussion.

*Internal Conflict.* The effect of harsh state repression on organizational structure can be observed by analyzing conflicts between different camps in the relatively moderate Palestinian organizations: Fatah, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Palestinian People’s Party.

*Fatah.* If suicide bombing were adopted by an organization mainly to achieve strategic goals (e.g., the liberation of what insurgents believe is their homeland) or to increase the popularity and the prestige of their organization, one would expect that the central leadership of that organization would be the body to initiate and support the decision. That is because

the central leadership of an organization is usually more strategically inclined than the rank and file, and it is the first to benefit from an increase in organizational popularity and prestige. However, that does not apply to suicide bombing undertaken by Fatah. The vast majority of Fatah's suicide bombings were conducted by Fatah's military wing, the Tanzim or al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a group of relatively young activists that emerged in the occupied territories. The bombings were condemned, often strongly and publicly, by the older, central leadership of Fatah, which emerged when they were exiled in Tunisia. Although much debate still exists about Fatah's first leader, Arafat, regarding his stance on suicide bombing (discussed later), there is no doubt that most of Fatah's central leadership and Central Committee members opposed the tactic:

The decision to use martyrdom operations was spontaneous. . . . Abu Mazen [the leader of the moderate camp in Fatah and the current Palestinian president] and I as well as many of Fatah's leaders were opposed to martyrdom operations from the beginning. Our views have been declared and we were in favor of the non-militarization of the *intifada* and the avoidance of using of such means, as this would result in a lot of damage to our cause. The world is not ready to study the motivations behind martyrdom operations, the world will only see that such operations took place at restaurants and buses. (Nabil Amr)

These words by one of Fatah's well-known leaders, a former cabinet minister and at present a senior advisor to the Palestinian president, represent the position that typifies the great majority of Fatah's central leaders toward the organization's suicide bombings.

Why were the Tanzim "more sensitive" to Israeli repression than the central leadership? First, Israeli repression did not target Fatah's central leadership. Repression was directed mainly against the younger camp from the first months of the second *intifada*, when Israel assassinated some of its leading members. Almost all of Fatah's members who were assassinated by Israel were from this camp: 69 activists until July 2005, including 25 who were targeted before Fatah's adoption of suicide bombing. In contrast, 18 percent of Hamas activists who were assassinated during the same period were high-ranking leaders.<sup>50</sup> The thousands of detainees and wanted and injured persons were also mainly from the younger camp. The second reason why the Tanzim were more sensitive to Israeli repression was that Fatah's local activists did not read about Israeli repression against the Palestinian public from the news, as did most of the central leadership. They experienced it firsthand and on a daily basis in their refugee camps, villages, and cities and through their interactions with their family members, neighbors, and friends. In short, young Fatah activists were exposed to Israeli repression more than older, moderate Fatah leaders. Therefore, the reaction to that repression in the form of suicide bombing was also developed "on the ground," as it were.

Arafat's position regarding the use of violence during the second *intifada* was somewhere between Fatah's moderate and radical camps, and depended on political circumstances. As noted earlier, many researchers who have studied the second *intifada* have concluded that it did not start by a decision from Arafat or any other Palestinian leader. However, it seems that after Camp David, Arafat was looking for an opportunity (e.g., limited violence) to promote better conditions for future negotiations with Israel and put pressure on the Barak government. These political circumstances and the severity of the Israeli actions against the Palestinian public may have motivated Arafat to give a "green light" to Fatah activists to attack Israeli soldiers and settlers during the *intifada's* first year. Thus, Israeli accusations regarding Arafat's involvement in violent activities against the Israelis could have been accurate during this period.

However, political circumstances after the 11 September 2001 attacks made it difficult for Arafat to support military operations, especially suicide bombings against Israeli civilians. All Fatah's suicide bombing was conducted after 11 September 2001; therefore, it is unlikely that Arafat supported the suicide bombing carried out by Fatah's local activists. This conclusion is supported by the author's interviews with people who were close to Arafat in that period: by Arafat's repeated condemnation of Fatah-sponsored suicide bombings publicly; and by his eagerness to meet with Shimon Peres two weeks after 11 September. That meeting led to the declaration of a cease-fire. It lasted until the January 2002 assassination of Fatah local leader Raed Karmi, which triggered Fatah's first suicide bombing. Even after that, on 11 February 2002, Arafat decided to dismantle the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. However, the group issued a statement challenging Arafat's decision.<sup>51</sup> In the end, Arafat's inability to control his own organization and the suicide bombings it conducted was the major justification used by Sharon to declare Arafat as "irrelevant" and a "terrorist," and to keep him hostage in his compound until his death on 11 November 2004. In short, Arafat's position toward Fatah's suicide bombing seems to be similar to the position of the central leadership of Fatah.

*The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Palestinian People's Party.* These secular organizations did not use suicide bombing, but they witnessed internal disputes similar to those that took place in Fatah, albeit to a lesser degree and with a different outcome. All seven Palestinian People's Party leaders and six of seven Democratic Front leaders described how Israeli repression during the second *intifada* increased internal pressure on the leaderships of these organizations to adopt extreme forms of harsh protest, including suicide bombing. Many of those leaders said that radical voices varied over time and place. When and where harsh state repression was intense and deadly (e.g., almost always in the Gaza and the Nablus areas, and almost everywhere in 2002), such voices became louder and their influence became more pronounced. Even so, opposition to suicide bombing in the Palestinian People's Party and the Democratic Front was much stronger than support. As a result, some members of these organizations resigned and joined other, more radical organizations. The author was provided with a list of names of such activists and discovered that some of them were involved in suicide bombing operations. Although the central leaderships of these two organizations opposed suicide bombing against Israeli civilians, they did not condemn such attacks in public statements. When asked about the reasons behind this weak opposition, many leaders, such as the Secretary-General of the Palestinian People's Party, Bussam al-Salhee, referred to Israel's harsh actions against Palestinian civilians:

I admit that there was a lack of courage in expressing our positions appropriately and strongly. . . . The scale of Israeli crimes was massive, which didn't leave any space to condemn such operations. Not only was it hard, but embarrassing, for any Palestinian faction to condemn the killing of Israeli civilians while Palestinian civilians were murdered on a daily basis.

In conclusion, analysis shows that harsh occupation policies not only "drive up the level of suicide terrorism once it occurs," as Pape argues, but is also a major factor behind the organizational decision to adopt the tactic in the first place. Suicide bombing is an extreme reaction by secular organizations to extreme and increasing repression by the target state, whereas for religious organization it is both a reaction and a strategy. The two logics, the strategic and the retaliatory are not always consistent, hence the many "complaints" the author heard from Palestinian leaders about absence of a "unified policy." But it is

clear that Palestinian organizations are much more sensitive to the external enemy than to the domestic competition; as shown, the Islamic organizations used suicide bombing even when Palestinian public support was very low (the 1990s wave), while secular organizations such as Fatah waited more than 16 months during the second *intifada* before engaging in suicide bombing—despite the presence of all of the major factors identified by Bloom’s theory from the first months of the *intifada* (strong public support and organizational competition). Moreover, Fatah and the Popular Front did not need to engage in suicide bombing against Israeli civilians to increase their popularity because public support for old tactics was higher; Palestinian public support for suicide bombing against Israeli civilians was around 60 percent and support for guerrilla attacks against soldiers and settlers was more than 90 percent.<sup>52</sup>

### *The Micro Level*

Unlike the organizational level, the strong effect of Israeli repression on the motivations of individual Palestinian suicide bombers has been acknowledged, in one way or another, by previous researchers.<sup>53</sup> In the words of Avishai Margalit: “Having talked to many Israelis and Palestinians who know something about the bombers, and having read and watched many of the bombers’ statements, my distinct impression is that the main motive of many of the suicide bombers is revenge for acts committed by Israelis, a revenge that will be known and celebrated in the Islamic world”<sup>54</sup> The present author’s findings regarding the motivations of the 43 suicide bombers studied in the summer of 2006 led to a similar conclusion. Moreover, little support was found for the notion that the individual bombers were “manipulated” by their organizations, as is sometimes said.

In the last part of the interviews with the relatives of the bombers, and after many questions about the background of the bomber and his or her family, the author asked respondents a general question about the motivation of the bomber to carry out the suicide attack. Respondents were also asked to rank each of the factors they mentioned in order of importance and to support their answers by quoting or paraphrasing the bomber. After the interviews the author compared their answers with each other and with the materials that the bomber left behind (videotapes, last will and testaments made before their operations, etc.). The author was able to rank the first and second motivations of 40 cases with a high level of confidence. In 39 cases, taking revenge because of Israeli action against the bomber, somebody she or he knew, or against the Palestinians in general, was either the first or the second factor (the first factor for 28 cases and the second factor for eleven).<sup>55</sup> The following words from the suicide note of Jamal Nasser, a 22 year old from Nablus, who blew himself up on 29 April 2001, are typical:

Who does not feel outrage and is not eager for revenge when participating in funerals for fallen martyrs, especially collective funerals in Nablus . . . and when watching the mourning mothers and wives and children of martyrs on television? . . . And who does not empathize with people whose homes were demolished, and stores destroyed? . . . And who does not feel anger when children are murdered and trees ripped up, and cities shelled, who . . . who . . . who? I marched in their funerals, chanted with the angry crowds, deeply eager for revenge but didn’t know how.

Most of the bombers approached the organizations rather than being approached by them. Families of bombers often have many details about the events surrounding recruitment. They typically enjoyed strong personal ties with the bomber, and after the attack they were highly motivated to collect information from different sources, including the cell that helped the bomber carry out his or her attack. These circumstances explain the high response rate to the question of “whether the bomber took the initiative and was looking for an organization to recruit him/her for a suicide mission or was approached and encouraged by the organization.” In 32 of 43 cases the author was told that the bomber “took the initiative.” In three cases “he was approached and convinced by the organization,” and in eight cases the respondent did not know. This striking finding is supported by other findings. For example, among the 32 cases were 14 cases of bombers who joined the organization that took responsibility for the attack mainly because that organization was “ready” to provide him or her with the required means and information to carry out a suicide attack. These 14 individuals were either “independents” (that is, they never belonged to any militant organization) or members of organizations that did not use suicide bombing or were not prepared to provide the bomber with the needed means at the time he or she was ready to carry a suicide attack. For instance, Hamas member Inad Shokairat blew himself up on 22 March 2002, in an operation organized by the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade after being told by Hamas activists that there is “a long waiting list.” Similarly, Rami Ghanim was active in the Marxist Popular Front but conducted his suicide attack on 30 March 2003, under the auspices of Islamic Jihad.

In at least two cases, the organization tried to convince volunteers that they “should not” or “must not” go on a suicide mission. Consider the following case. According to b’Tselem, on 3 January 2004, the Israeli army killed a Palestinian child named Amjad Bilal Nabil al-Masri, a 15-year-old resident of Nablus, during an incursion into the city to arrest wanted persons.<sup>56</sup> Amjad was the younger brother of 17-year-old suicide bomber Iyad al-Masri. Iyad was with his younger brother when he was shot. The author interviewed Iyad’s father and the following is part of what he had to say:

The next morning, during Amjad’s funeral, Iyad’s first cousin Muhammad (14 years old) was also killed by an Israeli sniper who was located on the Jersim Mountain near the cemetery. Iyad was very sad and angry and wanted to take revenge. . . . His Mother noticed and told me . . . [so] I sealed the window of his room and asked him to stay home. Iyad sneaked out of the house while everybody was busy accepting condolences . . . and left the house looking for al-Buhtee [a local leader of Iyad’s organization, Palestinian Islamic Jihad]. . . . Our neighbor (. . .), who was with Iyad, told me a month later that Iyad requested an explosive belt from al-Buhtee but the latter denied his request, telling him that he ‘should not do that’ since the family has just lost one of its members. . . . Iyad turned to Naief Abu-Sharekh [a local leader of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade]. The latter also refused his request. Iyad was stubborn and kept insisting. . . . He also threatened Abu-Sharekh that he would attack an Israeli military checkpoint using a knife.

In the end, Fatah’s local leader provided Iyad with an explosive belt, which he used to blow himself up on 12 January 2004, nine days after the death of his brother and his first cousin.

Some of the aforementioned findings may explain why Hamas leader Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi was able to claim on Al-Jazeera TV in 2002 that people are knocking on Hamas

leaders' doors asking for suicide belts and that the number of volunteers is much higher than the organization's ability to produce suicide belts. That does not mean the role of the organization in suicide bombing is minor. It is crucial. But it is also different from what many people think. Merari, the first scholar to study Lebanese and Palestinians suicide bombers, correctly noted that "no organization can create a person's basic readiness to die. The task of recruiters is not to produce but rather to identify this predisposition in candidates and reinforce it."<sup>57</sup>

In short, most of the Palestinian bombers of the second *intifada* were not brainwashed by leaders of their organizations, or by some sheikh sitting in a corner of a mosque. Rather, they were brainwashed on a daily basis by a more powerful machine: harsh state repression.

## Conclusion

Scholars who study suicide bombing often argue that this weapon is used in the advanced stage of a conflict and that "it often appears as a weapon of last resort."<sup>58</sup> However, this generalization seems also to apply to harsh state repression by an occupying force: when an occupying state feels that it is losing all legitimacy in the eyes of the people it governs, as has been the case with Israel since the beginning of the first *intifada* in 1987 (five years before the appearance of Palestinian suicide bombing), and when it feels that it might lose the territories it occupies, it becomes very aggressive, more prepared to cross previous red lines and less careful in dealing with the insurgents and the occupied community. This aggressiveness is also more likely to become more severe when the territories under dispute are of extreme significance to the foreign power, and when the occupiers and the occupied community belong to different cultures or religions. Thus, harsh state repression in conflicts where suicide bombing has been used should not be perceived only as a reaction to suicide bombing; it often precedes and is a major cause of suicide attacks. Also, the fact that insurgents or occupied communities usually have strategic goals should not lead one to assume that the appearance of extreme tactics such as suicide bombing in an advanced stage of a conflict necessarily means that insurgents have adopted a new national liberation strategy. This is only one of three possibilities. The other two are (1) suicide bombing is an extreme reaction by insurgents to extreme and increasing repression by the target state (a way to deter the state from continuing its severe actions or what many Palestinian leaders call the achievement of a "a balance of horror" rather than "a balance of power") and (2) suicide bombing is sometimes combined with strategic considerations. As shown herein, combined motivational logics and mixed rationales appear in the same conflict and within the same insurgent organization. Therefore, putting most suicide bombing around the world in a single basket labeled "strategic" oversimplifies a complex reality and, incidentally, makes victory in the "war on terror" seem almost impossible.

In the Palestinian case, suicide bombing is an extreme reaction by secular organizations to extreme and increasing repression by the target state, whereas for the religious organizations it is both a reaction and a strategy. Deterring the target state from using certain types of harsh repression such as assassinations and the killing of civilians is an end in itself, at least, for some organizations, and is one goal for others. In their decision whether to adopt suicide bombing or not, and increase or decrease the frequency of its use, Palestinian organizations are more sensitive to the actions of the external enemy than to the domestic competition. Harsh state repression does not only provide insurgent organizations with "religious and moral legitimacy." It also provides them with popular legitimacy; during the 1990s, when Israel repression was relatively moderate, Palestinian

public support for suicide bombing was also low. However, while harsh state repression under Barak's government was a major factor behind the significant increase in Palestinian public support for suicide bombing in the first few months of the second *intifada*, repression under Sharon's government played a major role in keeping support high. Strategic goals, which varied little over time, cannot on their own explain why Palestinian society changed its position from opposing the killing of civilians of another society to supporting or even demanding such acts in a period of a few months. The effect of harsh repression at the micro level is even stronger and much harder to ignore. As this article has shown, taking revenge because of Israeli action against the bomber, somebody she or he knew, or against the Palestinians in general was the main motivation for the majority of the bombers in the second *intifada*. In addition, public support turned individual bombers into heroes and thus encouraged more volunteers. Without individuals, organizations cannot conduct their suicide attacks, and without enough volunteers suicide "campaigns" are not possible.

The findings stress the need to examine whether state violence has similar effects on insurgents who employ suicide bombings in other conflicts. The indicators of such effects are enough to stimulate the curiosity of researchers trying to make sense of suicide bombing. Consider only the effects of the severe 1983 attacks on Tamil civilians in Sri Lanka, the destruction of Kurdish villages by the Turkish state, the total Russian air bombing of population centers in Chechnya, and the atrocities of the Ministry of Interior and security services in Iraq.

This article also raises questions that are crucial for developing more general explanations of suicide bombing. For example, while harsh state repression may be a factor underlying the adoption of suicide bombing in some conflicts, many more conflicts have witnessed harsh repression without giving rise to suicide bombing. Clearly, there is a need to know the conditions under which harsh state repression has different effects. Most scholars who study suicide bombing seem to agree that suicide bombing is often a weapon of the weaker party in a conflict, and it is perceived by its perpetrators as more effective than alternatives. In addition, it may be that suicide bombing tends to be used by especially highly integrated or solidary groups. As Émile Durkheim noted, members of such groups are especially prone to committing "altruistic suicide," or taking their lives in the service of collective goals.<sup>59</sup> Comparative analysis can determine whether level of solidarity and other factors account for the different effects of harsh state repression.

Finally, the policy implications of the aforementioned findings are straightforward. It is difficult for the target state to make strategic concessions but it is much easier to make tactical changes in the way it deals with insurgency. Avoiding targeting civilians should be on the top of the list. Also, arresting organizational leaders would be much more affective than assassinating them. Such changes in Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip may lead to the pullout of organizations such as Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine from the world of suicide bombing, make the leaders who support suicide bombing a minority in Hamas, and isolate the leaders who advocate suicide bombing in Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It might also lead to a significant reduction in the number of suicide bombing volunteers and the return of Palestinian public support for suicide bombing to more moderate levels. This seems the most effective way to protect the lives of innocent Israeli civilians. It seems that the target state is able to stop suicide bombing, but the continuation of harsh repression plays a major role in motivating insurgents to create ways to adjust to the new reality. Fourteen years of Palestinian suicide bombing support this argument.

## Notes

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