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## From Religion to Revenge

### *Becoming a Hamas Suicide Bomber*

Bader Araj

The second Palestinian intifada, or “uprising,” triggered by the visit of Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount, or Haram al-Sharif, on 28 September 2000 and lasting until 2005, was far deadlier than any other confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since 1967. It started two months after the failure of a serious attempt to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at Camp David, where the Israeli government had been willing to make the biggest concessions ever, so from the Israeli perspective it presumably showed that the Palestinians were trying to force them to offer more concessions. The timing was challenging for Israel in several ways. Since the uprising erupted four months after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, the Israeli military could not let another challenge to its power pass without proving it still retained its once-vaunted deterrent capability. In addition, the first months of the intifada coincided with the Israeli electoral campaign, and Prime Minister Ehud Barak wanted to show the Israeli public that his policies toward the Palestinians were no softer than those of his rival, Ariel Sharon. The confluence of these factors may explain why the Israeli army adopted a harsh and repressive policy from the very beginning of the uprising despite the fact that the levels and kinds of violence of the Palestinian protest, at least during its first three months, were roughly similar to the demonstrations, marches, and stone throwing of the First Intifada (1987–93). Harsh Israeli repression, in turn, partially explains why the second uprising witnessed an unprecedented number of suicide attacks: of the approximately 200 Palestinian suicide bombings since they first employed this tactic, in 1993, 173 were conducted during the Second Intifada.

This chapter explores the lives of two Hamas suicide bombers, Na'el Abu Hilayel and Maher Hubashi, who killed themselves and twenty-nine Israelis in separate attacks during the height of the Second Intifada, in December 2001 and November 2002, respectively. Both were members of Hamas, though their motivations for becoming suicide bombers differed.

Hamas, the first Palestinian and Sunni religious organization to employ suicide bombing, in 1993, was established in December 1987, a few days after the eruption of the first Palestinian intifada. Until the 1980s, Muslim fundamentalists in the West Bank and Gaza were affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and little involved in direct confrontation with Israel. The 1979 Iranian Revolution shook the political quiescence of brotherhood members in Palestine by demonstrating that radical Muslims could mobilize to overthrow a powerful, United States-backed regime. This assertiveness became the hallmark of the First Intifada, which gave young Palestinian activists an opportunity to become politically involved and revolt against the reform-minded older generation. Misperceiving Islamism as a conservative counterforce to the nationalist Palestine Liberation Organization, the Israeli government permitted the founding of Hamas in 1987 and the funneling of money from Saudi Arabia to the new organization. It even allowed Hamas activists to speak publicly, organize, publish, and demonstrate while punishing the PLO for similar actions.

Unlike the PLO, which explicitly recognized Israel in 1988 and then again with the Oslo Accords, Hamas has never officially assented to recognize Israel, at least not in advance of a permanent agreement that would satisfy core Palestinian demands regarding territory and refugees. Believing that Israel's influence over U.S. policy made any American-sponsored negotiating process futile, Hamas leaders concluded that "we must depend on the nation's options of jihad and resistance rather than American or other mediations." Within this paradigm, large-scale violence, and suicide bombings in particular, were understood as a way to exact a high enough price from Israel to force it to make desired concessions. As the Gaza-based leader Khalil abu Laila explained, "Martyrdom operations enabled us to get rid of the unjust Oslo Accords, put the Palestinian cause back on the right path, mobilize the Palestinians around the choice of resistance, and attract Arabic and Islamic attention and support. . . . They also put an end to the Zionist dream of expanding Israel to include the area between the Nile River and the Furat [Eufrates] River. Instead, and for the first time, martyrdom operations forced the Israelis to separate themselves from the West Bank by building a wall and hiding behind it." This was the strategic aspect of Hamas's rationale. Equally important were the retaliatory considerations. As the Hamas leader Abd al-Fattah Dukhan (who many people believe wrote Hamas's first communiqué) argued, "They [the Israelis] target our civilians all the time, [so] martyrdom operations treat them the

same way. . . . Our first suicide attacks came to avenge the killing of twenty-nine Palestinians in the al-Harem al-Ibrahim [in 1993] as well as the massacre that took place earlier in the al-Aqsa Mosque [in 1991].” Given both considerations, it’s not surprising that Hamas also believed that it was legitimate to strike Israel inside its 1967 borders, where both of the suicide bombings discussed in this chapter occurred, rather than limiting them to the Occupied Territories.

#### NA’EL ABU HILAYEL AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION

“I do not want to marry a woman from this life but women from the afterlife [the seventy-two virgins that the Qur’an promises to martyrs].” These were the words of Na’el Abu Hilayel, a twenty-two-year-old Palestinian suicide bomber, to his uncle three days before he blew himself up, on 21 November 2002. Many Palestinian men of Na’el’s age, especially those who, like him, did not pursue a university education, get married. But his words did not surprise people who knew him well.

According to his parents and brother, Na’el had been religious since his childhood. As young as eight, he prayed regularly in the mosque. Later he used to fast not only for the month of Ramadan, not eating or drinking anything from sunrise to sunset, but also on many “extra days,” as the most religious Muslims often do throughout the year. He also used to lead people in prayer (a task that sheikhs usually undertake). Na’el memorized the entire Qur’an and always carried a small copy of the holy book in his pocket. Even while working with his father in Bethlehem’s vegetable market, when fewer customers approached the stall, he would steal some moments to read verses from the Qur’an.

Na’el’s father, Azmi, was fifty-three years old when I interviewed him in 2006. He had a long black beard peppered with white hairs and often uttered Islamic religious citations when speaking to indicate to listeners his deeply held religious beliefs. Na’el was also influenced, but probably to a lesser degree, by his mother, a homemaker, who was forty-five when I met her in the family’s house that summer. She was wearing a full dress and a *hijab* (head covering), whose end she used to wipe the tears that formed in her eyes when talking about her late son despite the three and a half years that had passed since his death.

Spending most of his life in the Governorate of Hebron, well known as a conservative region of the West Bank and a base for religious Palestinian organizations, especially Hamas, also likely influenced Na’el’s strongly religious sensibility. Indeed, he made a tour of the mosques where he regularly prayed in the last month of his life in preparation for his suicide bombing. He only shaved his beard two days before his death. His mother, surprised, did not know that the shaving was part of his preparation to carry out a suicide attack—religious Palestinian suicide bombers typically shave their beards right before participating in a suicide mission to be able to enter Israeli towns and crowds without raising any suspicion. Hours

before his death, Naël, who was fasting, was seen praying in the Khalifa Umar bin al-Khattab Mosque, built near the Church of Nativity about fourteen centuries ago when Muslims first came to spread Islam in the Holy Land.

Naël's father recalled his last meeting with his son with mixed feelings of pride and sadness:

He came back from the mosque with a glowing face and apologized for not being able to replace me so I can have my turn to pray. He pointed to the other side of the [open] marketplace and said, "Some of my friends are waiting for me." I did not know that was the last time I would see him. He left and never came back. He called me from his mobile phone after half an hour, telling me he had to go to the northern area [of the West Bank] to take care of some important matters. The next morning, I learned from Israeli media that the Palestinian who blew himself up on bus number 20 in Jerusalem was my son. . . . May God have mercy upon him. He always cared about the afterlife, not this life. . . . He realized his wish to die as a martyr.

Naël carried out his attack at seven in the morning on 21 November 2002. He wore an explosive belt packed with five kilograms of explosives and shrapnel, boarded a crowded public bus at Mexico Street in Jerusalem, and detonated the explosives while in the suburban neighborhood of Kiryat Menachem on the way to the next stop. Before boarding, Naël dropped his personal identification—which the Israelis found soon after the attack and which noted his place of residence—a move his father, citing some analysts who commented on the event, thinks was intentional, to send a message to Israel's prime minister that Israeli military operations in Bethlehem in the preceding months had failed to prevent Palestinian suicide bombers from reaching their targets in Israeli cities and towns.

The attack killed eleven Israelis, including five children who had boarded the bus to go to their schools on that cold morning, and injured more than fifty people, some seriously. Hamas claimed responsibility and described the attack as "revenge."

Despite Naël's religiousness, many of those who knew him were astonished that this quiet and somewhat shy young man would carry out a suicide attack, but close friends and family members were less surprised, as they were aware of his involvement in Palestinian resistance in the past. As a child and a teenager, he had participated in some of the First Intifada's activities, such as throwing stones at Israeli soldiers. A local newspaper, in fact, published a picture of him throwing stones during that period.

Naël's father thinks his son was influenced by the massacre that the Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein carried out in Hebron in 1994. Goldstein opened fire inside the Cave of the Patriarchs mosque, killing twenty-nine Palestinians, an event Palestinians often link to their first suicide bombing campaign, which preceded the Second Intifada. It is likely that Naël was also affected by his father's arrest and

torture by Israeli occupation forces in 1973 for allegedly throwing a grenade at an Israeli military facility in Bethlehem. (He was released after eighteen days due to the lack of evidence and the absence of a confession.)

In the years that followed Goldstein's attack, the Oslo peace process continued, and with it an intensification of both settlement activity and conflict between Palestinians and Jews in the Hebron region. During this period Na'el was heard saying several times that Palestinians should take revenge for the Goldstein massacre. His mother recalled seeing him one day "sharpening a knife at both edges." She did not know at the time that her seventeen-year-old son was planning on stabbing 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. One of his friends heard him talking one day about that event: "I was a coward in the last moments. . . . It was difficult. . . . I was worried about that mother and her daughter who came from nowhere. I was afraid that the soldiers might start shooting in all directions if I attacked one of them."

The Second Intifada, which erupted when Na'el was almost twenty years old, provided him with the opportunity he was looking for to achieve his dream of becoming a martyr and inflicting maximum damage on the enemy. He published a telling short article in a local newspaper during the first year of the Second Intifada. Here is its full text:

On a calm summer night, I sat as I usually do, reading and thinking about God's Book [the Qur'an]. It was late. . . . I fell asleep while the book was still in my hand and heart. [Suddenly] I woke up because of the noises made by the atrocious feet, the feet of the rapist [Israeli] soldiers hitting everything and in every direction. They took me while I was unconscious to the interrogation room. I saw many questions in the eyes of their frenzied dogs and heard too many voices: *Confess . . . confess*. I agreed: *I will confess, I will tell everything*. I will tell about the mourning [Palestinian] mothers and the whimpers of the injured. I will tell about the demolished homes and ripped olive trees which they pulled from their roots, our roots. I will confess that I ate bread dipped in blood and drank glasses of bitterness, the last of which was the massacre in the al-Aqsa Mosque [referring to the Palestinians killed on 28 September 2000 and the following days when Ariel Sharon, then the leader of the Israeli opposition, visited the mosque] and what has followed it and what will follow if we remain silent. I will keep confessing and confessing and confessing.

Na'el's story references examples of the Israeli repression of the Palestinians which he thought would only grow in intensity if the Palestinians did not react. This text also shows his deep religious feelings and the effect of his father's 1973 experience on him. Its themes confirm that Na'el was motivated primarily by religious inspiration and secondarily by the desire for revenge. Unlike many Palestinians, he was never arrested or injured by the Israelis. However, his deep religious

commitment and strong sense of national belonging made him feel that Israeli attacks on his people were personal attacks on him.

Muslims use the terms *martyr* and *martyrdom* in a religious context to refer to individuals who give their lives for the sake of Muslims and Islam. There is a debate among Muslim clerics whether suicide bombers are martyrs. However, most clerics consider Palestinian bombers to be martyrs since they die in the context of liberating their occupied land and attack civilians only as a reaction to the killing of Palestinian civilians by the Israeli army. The renowned French sociologist Émile Durkheim would call this reaction an “altruistic suicide,” a rare—in his time—form of suicide which, he argued, tends to be most frequent among tightly integrated groups.

My talks with the Abu Hilayel family were part of eighty-seven interviews that I conducted in 2006 to understand this type of suicide: forty-five with senior leaders of the six most influential Palestinian organizations, such as Hamas and Fatah (about seven leaders from each organization), and forty-two with close relatives and friends of suicide bombers in the year that followed the Second Intifada. The interviews’ aim was to examine the veracity of the five main motivations of suicide terrorists suggested by social scientists: psychopathology, culture (religion), rational choice, harsh state repression, and deprivation. The last can be either absolute—longstanding poverty and unemployment—or relative, the growth of an intolerable gap between expectations and rewards.

#### MOTIVATIONS FROM LIFE UNDER OCCUPATION

Naël’s motivations for becoming a suicide bomber fit in with the complex set that influenced the majority of suicide bombers I have studied, for the vast majority of whom revenge for Israeli violence was the principle motivation. Religion, which plays a primary or secondary role in motivating at least two-thirds of suicide bombers, also clearly shaped his actions. What is most interesting is that for Naël, as for the majority of suicide bombers I have studied, “liberating the homeland” was not among the most important rationales.

One thing that seems certain is that Naël was not suffering from any form of mental illness, a factor that some analysts have described as motivating the bombers. During the two interviews with Naël’s family and one of his close friends that my research assistant and I conducted separately but concurrently in one big room because of space limitations, we asked about his mental and psychological status in his last year. They stressed that he was mentally and physically healthy and that he did not suffer any personal crisis in the last year of his life that might have prompted him to conduct a suicide attack. We were told that he used to love and practice wrestling. He was social and popular among his friends. His father, for

example, described to me how a Palestinian Christian woman from Bethlehem who knew Na'el from the market burst into tears when she came to buy vegetables and he told her, "Your friend is gone." Na'el also enjoyed a strong relationship with his parents, three brothers, and nine sisters. "We give our kids whatever they need. . . . We spoil them," said his mother, who was trying to hide her tears under pressure from her husband, who urged her to be patient and accept God's will. When M.N., the close friend, heard me questioning Na'el's mental status in the interview, he declared in a firm tone, "Since Na'el was very religious, he would not commit suicide for personal reasons, because that is against the Islamic religion . . . It will prevent him from going to heaven." He also explained that the same applies to material incentives.

The family received financial support from some Palestinian and Lebanese institutions established to aid the relatives of suicide bombers, but this did not come close to covering its losses, including one of its main providers and its home, which the Israeli army destroyed right after the suicide attack. Na'el, who obtained a certificate in welding from a community college, used to sell vegetables from a car with his father in nearby villages before they moved their business to the town's vegetable market. Like 95 percent of the suicide bombers in my sample, he was employed. His father stressed that his family's economic situation has become much worse because of his son's involvement in a suicide attack.

There is another indication of the limited impact of socioeconomic motivation on suicide bombers. Forty-six percent of those in my sample came from cities, 34 percent from villages, and 20 percent from refugee camps. Palestinians consider refugees a low-status group, but only 31 percent of suicide bombers are from refugee camps or are refugees who live outside the camps.

One day after the attack, the Israeli army surrounded the family's home, gave them twenty minutes to remove their personal belongings, and then destroyed the house. "They did not give us enough time to remove any of our furniture or other belongings. I was only able to take some important identification documents, such as our birth certificates, and the Qur'an. . . . Also, several of the neighbors' houses were damaged during the destruction process," Na'el's father recalled.

The large family now lives in a rented, old, decrepit, small house<sup>7</sup> of only two rooms. Na'el's father told me that "when a guest or a relative comes to sleep over, I sleep outside in the open yard." He and one of his sons also described the difficulties the family faced in its attempts to find a place to live after the destruction of their house. Homeowners in Bethlehem refused to provide the Abu Hilayel family with a place to live because they were afraid that might put their houses at risk of expected visits by the Israeli army. "I even thought of putting up the tent given to us by the International Red Cross in the Nativity Square to protest against homeowners. I have not executed this idea, because finally a good man agreed to rent us this old place [their current home]," the father said in a tone of bitterness and



disappointment. Right after the attack, the Israeli army arrested him, two of Na'el's brothers, and two of Na'el's uncles, to take DNA samples, collect information about Na'el, and make sure that family members had not helped him. It also imposed a curfew on the whole town of Bethlehem, which suffered from harsh Israeli actions in the following months.

Na'el's body, like the majority of the bodies of suicide bombers in my sample, was interred in a special military cemetery inside Israel. According to his father and many other relatives of suicide bombers that I have interviewed, a family has to hire a lawyer and pay thousands of dollars to the lawyer and the Israeli government to obtain such a body for burial in the West Bank. Most of the bombers' bodies are still in the hands of the Israelis because their families cannot afford to recover them.

The harsh Israeli actions against the families of suicide bombers, including banning them from traveling outside the West Bank, are aimed at deterring other Palestinians from becoming suicide bombers by making them think about what will happen to their families after they die. Israel adopted the policy of destroying the homes of suicide bombers in July 2002 after the significant increase in Palestinian suicide attacks starting in 2001. That policy was also intended to make meaningless the financial support that families of suicide bombers received from Saddam Hussein from 2000 to March 2003. However, the collapse of Saddam's regime in April 2003, less than five months after Na'el's attack, prevented his family from receiving any Iraqi financial support, which had increased since February 2002 from the equivalent of \$10,000 to \$25,000 for each family, still barely enough to build a modest house in Palestine.

Na'el's action provoked international condemnation and different reactions from local and regional leaders. Hamas, which he had been a member of since he was seventeen years old and which was responsible for about 44 percent of the suicide attacks during the Second Intifada, declared that very day that Na'el Abu Hilayel's suicide attack came as part of a "bill" the Israelis "must pay for assassinating Salah Shehade, the general leader of Hamas's military wing, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam." Shehade was killed along with his wife, his daughter, and fifteen Palestinian civilians, including seven children, when an Israeli F-16 aircraft dropped a one-ton bomb on a building in a crowded residential neighborhood in Gaza where he lived. Hamas's now-late leader Dr. Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, whose picture Na'el kept in his room, declared on the Arab TV station Al Jazeera on the day of Na'el's attack that "such attacks have forced some Israeli leaders to urge their government to withdraw its forces from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip."

A spokesperson of the Israeli government declared that its response was going to be quick. However, this was a sensitive time for Prime Minister Sharon, who was preparing to participate in the Likud Party's internal elections. Na'el's attack showed the limited effects of the large-scale Israeli military operation Defensive

Shield on 29 March 2002, which Sharon and his ministers had masterminded and which led to the reoccupation of major Palestinian towns in the West Bank to prevent Palestinian bombers from attacking targets inside Israel. This operation had been triggered by a major Palestinian suicide attack in Netanya that killed more than thirty-five Israeli civilians, including many elderly people, some of them Holocaust survivors.

#### MAHER HUBASHI'S MIXED MOTIVATIONS

Three Palestinian young men, twenty-three-year-old Maher Hubashi and his close friends Ashraf al-Saeed and Imad Zubaidee, decided to conduct suicide attacks in March 2001 against Israeli targets, to revenge the hundreds of Palestinian activists and civilians, including tens of children, the Israeli army killed in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip during the first period of the uprising. However, the friends had a dispute over who would conduct the first suicide attack. Each one expressed his willingness to take the first turn. To solve this unusual conflict, one of them suggested drawing lots. Imad picked up the first number and Ashraf the second; Maher, the subject of this section, probably felt unhappy when he drew the number 3. Muhiealdien Hubashi, Maher's father, who told me this story when I interviewed him in the family's house in the summer of 2006, believes that the turning point in his son's life which made him fulfill the promise he gave to his two friends, who blew themselves up a few months before Maher's attack, came in the summer of that year.

On the morning of 31 July 2001, the phone rang in Hamas's media office, in a sixth-floor building in the city of Nablus, Maher's home city. "Who is calling?" asked Jamal Mansour, one of Hamas's senior political leaders in the West Bank, who had come to the office a short time earlier accompanied by Jamal Saleem, another Hamas senior leader in the West Bank. The person on the line explained that he worked for the BBC and was calling to arrange an interview with the two leaders about their perspectives regarding the Palestinian uprising which had erupted ten months earlier.

About one minute after that phone call, an Israeli Apache helicopter, seen flying in the area by some of the city's residents, fired several missiles on Hamas's office. The two leaders died instantly, in addition to four other Palestinians killed as "collateral damage" during the Israeli attack: the brothers Bilal and Ashraf Abdelmunem, eight and ten years old, respectively, who were playing on the street near the targeted building, and two Palestinian journalists. Hours after the incident, the BBC issued a statement stressing that none of its journalists or employees had called the Hamas media office that day.

It turned out that the phone call was arranged by the Shabak, Israel's internal security service, to verify the presence of the two leaders inside the office. The

assassination provoked furious Palestinian condemnation and triggered an intense debate among Israeli politicians, who were split over this significant change in Israeli policy during the intifada, since for the first time the state was targeting Palestinian political leaders rather than field leaders and activists.

Maher, as a Hamas member and field activist in Nablus, had long known the two leaders and had an appointment with them on that day. He arrived a few minutes after the attack and saw the body parts of the six Palestinians scattered in the office and the street. He was in shock, lost consciousness, and was taken to a nearby hospital. Some of what he wrote in his will verifies the connection his father made between Maher's willingness to conduct a suicide attack and the attack on the Hamas media office. Maher mentioned the two leaders by name:

It is better for someone who has been beaten up to hit back rather than do nothing. Those [the Israelis] who watch us will increase their attacks on us if we stop our jihad [religious struggle and, in this context, military operations]. Yes, there is no solution but jihad. Anyone who thinks that the blood of our leaders Jamal Mansour, Jamal Saleem, Ahmed Marshoud, and the engineer Ayman Halaweh [the last two were also assassinated by the Israelis] and the blood of all our martyrs will go for nothing is delusional, delusional, delusional. As the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades has taught us through its strong retaliations, [Prime Minister] Sharon will, God willing, taste the bitterness we have tasted. God is witness to our words.

After the three friends delivered their promises to one another, Imad, the winner of the first turn, killed two Israeli civilians and injured about fifty others, some seriously, when he blew himself up in a bus station in the Israeli city of Kfar Saba in April 2001. This was about three months before the assassination incident, which strongly affected Ashraf, the second to carry out a suicide mission. When one of his friends came to the store where worked and told him about the assassination of the two leaders, whom he also knew personally, he left in tears and went to see the targeted building. Nine days later, he drove a white car and blew himself up at an Israeli military checkpoint in the Jordan Valley, killing two Israeli soldiers and seriously injuring a third.

Maher's attack, which took place eight and four months after the attacks of each of his two friends, was far deadlier. Two days before his death, he told his mother after he kissed and hugged her before going to work that "I do not know how I am going to leave you, Mother." Unaware of the exact meaning of his words, she replied, "What are you talking about? You are just going to work, and you will be back in the evening."

When he left his house for the last time, he told his mother that he was going to sleep in the house of one of his married sisters. According to his mother, "We [family members] were surprised when I called his sister the next morning and she said that he did not come. . . . He is not the type of a person that would lie . . .

We went to his workplace, but he was not there. We asked his friends from the [an-Najah] University, but nobody had seen him. We kept calling his mobile phone, but it was [off]. . . . Several days after his death we found his mobile phone hidden in a locker in his room.”

Maher’s bombing occurred on 2 December 2001, in the Israeli coastal city of Haifa. According to Israeli newspaper accounts, after Maher boarded a bus, he approached a woman who looked like an Arab and asked her to leave immediately because something terrible was going to happen. He paid the driver with a large bill and went to the middle of the vehicle, then blew himself up as the driver asked him to collect his change. The bombing killed more than eighteen Israeli civilians and injured about forty, some seriously.

In addition to the deaths of the two Hamas leaders, Maher had wanted to revenge the killing of young Palestinians by the Israeli army. According to his mother, Maher, who was known for his love of children—especially his youngest brother, Kareem, who was six years old at the time of Maher’s attack—used to hang the pictures of Palestinian children whom Israeli soldiers had killed on the walls of his room. These included, for example, the picture of Mohammed al-Darra, the twelve-year-old Palestinian boy who was killed in the second day of the uprising as he hid with his father behind a barrel in Gaza and whose death the correspondent of the French TV station France 2 videotaped. Maher also kept the picture of the four-month-old Palestinian Iman Hijou, whom an Israeli bullet killed while she was in her mother’s lap.

Maher was also eager to revenge the deaths and injuries of some of his neighbors, friends, and relatives, such as his aunt who was seriously harmed by an Israeli action. He was also affected by the assassination of his friend Mahmoud abu-Hunoud, who was killed by an Israeli missile that targeted his car ten days before Maher’s suicide attack. Abu-Hunoud, a local Hamas military leader, had been a political prisoner in a Palestinian Authority prison but was released after he survived an assassination attempt by Israeli aircraft that bombed the prison, killing several inmates and guards. Maher, who mentioned his friend by name in his will, used to visit Abu-Hunoud in prison. Eyewitnesses told the family after Maher’s death that he also used to visit his friend’s grave and cry there. These and other incidents explain the deep hatred Maher felt toward the Israelis and some of the strong words he used in his will: “I wish I had many souls [lives] so that I could revenge, time after another, too many massacres and humiliations [committed by the Israelis].”

A suicide attack is typically a collective action, requiring the involvement of several individuals to carry out various tasks, including collecting detailed information about the target and the best time and way for the attacker to enter Israel, driving the bomber to the target, making a suicide belt, videotaping the bomber reading his or her last will, and declaring responsibility. A letter to the family from

the incarcerated individual who helped Maher install the suicide belt around his body said that Maher pressured this person to add as many explosives as he could: "I told him that he could not carry this huge amount of explosive materials around his body, but he kept insisting, 'Put more. Put more.' He carried tens of kilograms of explosives." This may explain the high number of Israeli casualties from his attack and the huge explosion that Israeli eyewitnesses described, which blew apart the Egged (Israeli bus company) number 16 bus. The bus was traveling from the Neveh Sha'anani area in Haifa to Hadar, passing through the mixed Jewish-Arab Halissa area.

If revenge was Maher's primary motivation, religious inspiration also drove him. According to his family members and close friends, Maher was a religious person who prayed daily in nearby mosques and fasted the whole month of Ramadan. He even made a pilgrimage to Mecca, a religious duty that Muslims normally try to fulfill when they are older. He had also memorized seventeen parts of the Qur'an, which he used to teach to some of the children who came to the mosque where he often prayed. "The sheikh in the mosque told us that Maher used to read the Qur'an better than him," Maher's mother said proudly.

In a move that expressed his strong belief that Muslim martyrs go to heaven after their death, Maher visited the father of his friend Ashraf one day before he conducted his attack and asked if he needed anything from his dead son. "I was sitting in my store when Maher came to visit me. He greeted me, asked me how I was doing, and left. Then, after he walked about fifty meters, he turned back and asked me with a smile on his face, 'Uncle, do you want anything from Ashraf?' I did not take his weird question seriously. I thought he was joking." This is what Ashraf's father told Maher's family when he came to express his condolences after hearing that Maher had been killed in a suicide attack. In the two paragraphs that Maher devoted to his two friends in his will, he also expressed his deep belief that martyrs go to heaven and meet with the prophet Muhammad: "Dear friend Imad, I am coming soon. I'm so happy and excited to see you and meet and hug the master of humanity Muhammad, peace be upon him. I miss you. . . . I have been waiting a long time, Imad. Since you went to heaven on 22/04/2001, I have been awaiting my turn in the [military] operation right after you, but God's will was that I will be late this time. God has honored and rewarded me because I allowed you to achieve your wish for martyrdom before me."

Finally, in a mixed religious and retaliatory motivational logic, Maher refers in his will to what he saw as a humiliating cartoon of the prophet Muhammad made by some Israeli settlers and to what Israeli soldiers did to him when he visited the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem:

I have [also] chosen to revenge God and his Prophet, whom they [Israeli settlers] humiliated through bad words and by drawing a picture of a pig [probably the most

unpopular animal in the eyes of most Muslims] and writing on it, “This is Muhammad, the prophet of Muslims.” I also sacrifice myself and [my] soul to the al-Aqsa Mosque, this mosque which they stopped us from visiting [several years earlier, Israeli soldiers took his personal identification documents and kept him for hours when he tried to visit the mosque]. I say to them [Israelis] loudly: . . . “If you were able to prevent us from visiting the al-Aqsa Mosque physically, you cannot prevent our souls from visiting it. Here I am, giving my blood as a gift to light its lamps instead of oil. Can you prevent me from doing that?”

According to something Maher wrote that his family found after his death, his desire was to blow himself up in Jerusalem, but it seems that for operational considerations (i.e., stricter Israeli security measures because of frequent attacks in the holy city), Hamas chose Haifa for him as a target. This choice expresses part of the organization’s ideology, political vision, and tactics. It seems that Maher shared the feeling of many Palestinians that despite the Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian towns, the whole West Bank and, before Maher’s death, the Gaza Strip were under Israeli occupation.

#### RELIGION, REVENGE, AND LIBERATION?

Like Na’el Abu Hilayel and most of the other dozens of suicide bombers whose lives I have examined, Maher could not be characterized as suffering from any form of mental illness or psychopathology or from deprivation. Instead, religious inspiration and revenge primarily motivated him and Na’el. But Maher had an additional motivation, as he believed that suicide bombing was an effective means to liberate his homeland. And so in his will he asked the Palestinian negotiators to stop the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which he saw as humiliating:

To the negotiator: enough humiliation. . . . Enough shaking hands with [an Israeli] hand that is dripping with the blood of our people. . . . We have achieved nothing except that the Jews have recruited thousands of collaborators and are planning to kill our mujahideen [fighters]. They [Israelis] meet you and wear a mask called “peace,” but in fact it is “disgrace.” . . . You should know that peace has become an old brittle fashion. Jihad [in this context, military struggle] is the option toward victory and the liberation of Jerusalem. . . . No more fallacies and cease-fires.

Neither Na’el nor Maher was unemployed. Indeed, Maher was one of the two main providers for his family, who suffered financially after his bombing, also losing their home in much the same manner as did Na’el’s family. After obtaining his high school diploma, Maher started at an-Najah University in the city of Nablus. However, after several months he decided to enroll in a community college to study cooling and heating systems, which enabled him to have a good job in the

last two years of his life. His father recalled how Maher used to help financially, offering his savings (about \$3,000) to his father to cover the last payment for a piece of land that the family had bought. "When I told him that I would register part of the land under his name, he refused. . . . He also used to fully cover Kareem's expenses."

According to his family, Maher was physically and mentally healthy. He was a member of a soccer team called Solidarity and used to participate in competitions. He was described as social, calm, polite, generous, and energetic. He clearly had good relations with his retired father, homemaker mother, four married sisters, and two young brothers, to each of whom he devoted a paragraph in his will. He urged his mother to be "patient" when hearing about his death, his father to be "proud of him," and his two young brothers to take care of their parents and be good Muslims.

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#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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