

# The Rise and Fall of Suicide Bombings in the Second Intifada

Yoram Schweitzer

The decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict has seen several rounds of violence and has claimed many casualties on both sides. The second intifada<sup>1</sup> occupies a particularly painful place, especially for the Jewish population, which suffered an unprecedented high casualty toll – dead and injured – in a relatively short period of time.

As part of the violence perpetrated by the Palestinians during the second intifada, suicide bombings played a particularly prominent role and served as the primary effective weapon in the hands of the planners. Since the outbreak of the second intifada in late September 2000 until today, there have been a total of 146 suicide attacks, and more than 389 suicide attacks have been foiled.<sup>2</sup> Although the relative representation in the total number of hostile activities waged by Palestinian organizations was not high, suicide attacks were without a doubt the most significant component in the death and destruction they sowed. In the decade since September 2000, 516 of the 1178 deaths (43.8 percent) were caused by suicide attacks. In addition to the attacks on Israeli civilians, which also resulted in thousands of physical and emotional casualties, suicide bombings helped the Palestinian organizations instill fear among the Israeli public and create a sense – even if temporary – of danger on the streets, on public transportation, and at places of entertainment.

This essay presents a short description and analysis of the rise and fall of suicide terrorism in the decade since the second intifada erupted. It then presents the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives regarding their relative success in attaining their respective goals.

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### The Attacks of 1993–2000: Background to the Suicide Terrorism of the Second Intifada

The seeds of suicide terrorism in the second intifada were sown in the earlier use of the tactic from 1993 until 2000. While in this period Israel and the Palestinian Authority were engaged in a political process (the Oslo process) aimed at achieving a resolution to the historic conflict in a non-violent manner, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, organizations opposed to the political process, carried out more than 30 suicide attacks.

In April 1993, even before the Oslo accords were made public and the PLO leadership, led by Arafat, arrived in the territories from Tunis, Hamas began its series of suicide attacks. Hamas and Islamic Jihad subsequently made several failed attempts to carry out suicide attacks against IDF personnel in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. After the massacre in Hebron by Baruch Goldstein on Purim in 1994, Hamas as well as Islamic Jihad stepped up attempts to carry out painful suicide attacks inside Israeli cities. The use of suicide bombings by the organizations was aimed at attaining several goals: revenge for unusual attacks on Palestinians

The more intense the violence became and the greater the circle of Palestinian casualties, the more the number of would-be suicide bombers rose. Volunteers, some of whom were not even members of terrorist organizations, recruited their own dispatchers, turning the tables on the process.

(such as the Purim-day massacre in the Cave of the Patriarchs, or the targeted killing of Yihye Ayyash, “the engineer”); offsetting the inherent asymmetry between the sides and reducing the gap in the respective losses; challenging the legitimacy of the PA headed by Arafat to pursue political negotiations with Israel; and proving to the Palestinian public that only their way – only armed struggle – was the correct way to liberate Palestine. Hamas was also hoping to construct its force as a worthy governing alternative to the PA. The fact that suicide terrorism was cheap, relatively easy to effect, and particularly deadly made it – as it continued to prove its efficacy – the preferred tactic of these organizations for attacking Israel later on as well.

The decision to embark on suicide attacks against Israel was not self-evident for the Palestinian Islamic organizations. At the outset, there were theological discussions about the legitimacy of suicide attacks because of Islam’s categorical prohibition of

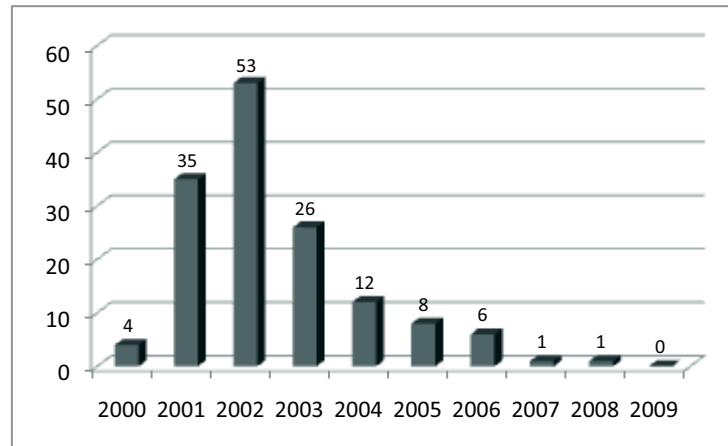
personal suicide (*intihar*) and concern about violating this prohibition by allowing or even encouraging suicide/self-sacrificing attacks (*istishhad*, i.e., self-sacrifice on God's path).<sup>3</sup> This theological debate accompanied the massive use of Palestinian suicide bombers during the second intifada and even aroused disputes among clerics around the Muslim world, as suicide terrorism rapidly spread to other points of conflict, especially after the events of 9/11. In practice, suicide bombings in the Palestinian arena enjoyed much support, based on their success in attacking Israel and causing significant casualties among civilians, who were seen as soldiers for all intents and purposes. In addition, the perceived necessity to respond to Israeli violence against Palestinian civilians and fight the occupation in order to liberate consecrated Islamic lands contributed to the sweeping support of the phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

Suicide attacks in the Israeli cities of Afula, Hadera, Tel Aviv, Netanya, and Jerusalem during the Oslo years, in particular in 1994-1997, caused significant losses among Israeli citizens and proved to the terrorist organizations in particular and to the Palestinians in general that they have an effective lethal weapon capable of inflicting much damage on Israeli society. This success was an especially poignant contrast to the sense of helplessness that had spread among the Palestinians in light of the disparity of force between the sides and the disproportionate gap in the number of casualties on both sides.

In the period when it seemed to the Palestinian public at large that the Oslo process might result in an independent Palestinian state, the majority supported whoever was leading the political process. The opposition's suicide attacks were seen as liable to impede the process and therefore there were many reservations about their use. However, as Palestinian hopes of realizing the dream of an independent state and liberating their people from the oppressive signs of Israeli occupation waned, the conditions for renewing acts of violence ripened and support for violent resistance against Israel, including suicide attacks, grew. The method ripened and achieved a new dimension once the second intifada erupted.

### **Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada**

When the violent events of the second intifada began, it was Fatah personnel who were involved in the violent clashes with the IDF or who



**Figure 1. Suicide attacks, 2000-2009**

**Source:** General Security Service, "Features of Terrorist Attacks in the Last Decade," September 14, 2010, [http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/Hebrew/TerrorInfo/decade/DecadeSummary\\_he.pdf](http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/Hebrew/TerrorInfo/decade/DecadeSummary_he.pdf).

carried out shooting attacks on Israeli citizens.<sup>5</sup> Hamas and Islamic Jihad operatives, largely incarcerated by the PA because of Israeli pressure on Arafat after the large wave of suicide terrorism in 1996 and 1997 but gradually released after the outbreak of the intifada, started to work alongside them. These operatives, together with fellow organization members, built the infrastructure that injected suicide terrorism with new intensity. Thus, after a small number of suicide attacks carried out by Hamas and Islamic Jihad members in late 2000, which claimed no lives among Israelis, the organizations – especially Hamas – started sending suicide bombers to Israeli towns at a more accelerated pace. This activity reached its peak in 2001–2003 (figure 1).

In 2002, Fatah, which had never before used suicide bombing and whose members were primarily part of the PA security apparatus, joined the dispatchers of suicide bombers. The first instance was carried out as revenge for the targeted assassination by Israel of Fatah activist Ra'id Carmi, who was wanted in Israel for terrorist activity, including a failed attempt to dispatch a suicide bomber.<sup>6</sup> Alongside their desire to avenge the death of their comrade, mid-ranking military and militant Fatah members, mainly followers of Marwan Barghouti, took advantage of the opportunity to start managing the suicide attack enterprise by

themselves, thereby gaining a great deal of the prestige earned already by their Hamas and Islamic Jihad rivals in the eyes of the Palestinian public hungry for revenge from Israel. For these Fatah operatives, suicide terrorism was also an expression of protest over Arafat's weakness in his conduct vis-à-vis Israel during the escalating military confrontation and his failure to include them in Fatah's leading ranks, instead appointing the old guard from Tunis to key positions of the Fatah and PA military apparatus.<sup>7</sup>

As the cycle of violence grew and the casualties on the Palestinian side mounted as a result of Israel's hard-line response to the wave of suicide bombings sweeping Israeli cities, so the number of volunteers seeking to take part in these actions rose. In contrast to the Oslo period, when would-be suicide bombers were chosen from the limited pool of Hamas and Islamic Jihad activists who needed a relatively long period of preparation, the terrorist organizations were now able to choose the best candidates most likely to be committed to their missions from among many volunteers. It seemed that the more intense the mutual violence became and the greater the circle of Palestinian casualties grew, the number of volunteers rose and a situation was created in which volunteers, some of whom were not even members of terrorist organizations, recruited their own dispatchers, turning the tables on the process. The availability of volunteers and their relatively easy access to dispatchers contributed to the "suicide industry" becoming cheap and easy to effect.

Moreover during the second intifada, in everything connected to suicide attacks, the ideological differences between Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Fatah, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine were ignored. The massive use of suicide attacks led to the creation of new myths in which the suicides – seen as sacrificing their personal good for the general welfare – became heroes and the terrorist organizations were seen as greatly powerful, with the proven ability to challenge Israel and cause it severe damage. The Palestinians learned rapidly that the power of the *istishhad* went far beyond merely being a tool for causing pain, destruction, and death to

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Israelis, and became a psychological weapon of fighting Israel because of its ability to leave its menacing imprint on the Israeli public's self-confidence and morale. Its effect also went beyond Israel's own borders and harnessed the attention of Islamic and world public opinion to the plight of the Palestinians.

On the Israeli side, because of the many severe terrorist attacks, many Israelis despaired of the Oslo process in particular and the chance of arriving at peace with the Palestinians in general. The sweeping support for the policy of peace, as expressed in the Oslo accords, was undermined. It became clear that the strategy of the *istishhad* had a significant effect on the (in)ability of applying strategic processes towards a political settlement in peaceful ways.

In contrast to the Oslo period, when Israel viewed security cooperation with the Palestinians as an important component in defending itself against suicide terrorism (at least until the mid-1990s), during the second intifada Israel's security policy assumed that the PA would not act resolutely against suicide terrorism and that elements within the PA were in fact active partners in its planning and execution. Thus, Israel's policy during the second intifada focused on activity that started on the

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ground level with frequent arrests and targeted assassinations against wanted terrorists and escalated to targeted killings of organization commanders and leaders. This policy, adopted because of the large number of suicide attacks and the massive losses on the Israeli side, generated an escalation in the number of revenge attacks from the Palestinians and increased the motivation of Palestinian youths to join terrorist organizations and undertake more suicide attacks.

### Israeli and Palestinian Perspectives

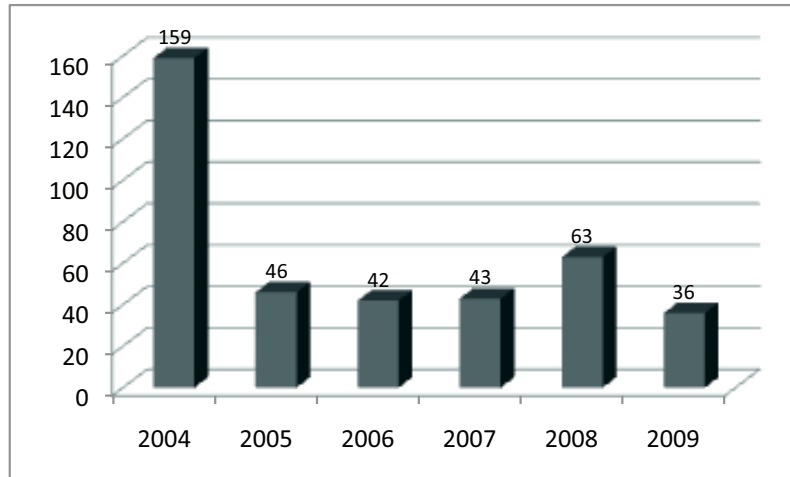
In Israel, the suicide bombings were seen as a war of attrition and an attempt to impose a Palestinian agenda on the government by causing intolerable

damage and disruption to every aspect of daily life. Therefore, the Israeli government adopted a policy that sought to maintain as normal a routine as possible and make decisions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

not driven by stress and despair. The counter initiative was designed to protect the life of the public while foiling Palestinian intentions to cancel the asymmetry between the sides by means of suicide terrorism, sometimes referred to as “the atomic weapon of the weak.” Within the difficult, challenging battle against suicide terrorism, which it managed with an iron fist, Israel tried to preserve the level of restraint required of a democratic state that finds itself embroiled in the midst of such warfare, while at the same time leaving itself recourse for a future renewal of the political process with elements within the PA.

In the end, Israel succeeded in tackling the comprehensive challenge posed by its enemies in the suicide terrorism camp. A combination of defensive measures – such as solid interceptive intelligence to stop attacks before they were carried out, effective security areas based on coordinated efforts by the army, police, and civil guard, and especially the construction of the security barrier in areas vulnerable to infiltration from the territories to Israel – joined offensive moves based on operational intelligence that allowed for systematic arrests and targeted killings of initiators and perpetrators of suicide attacks.<sup>8</sup> Overall, the campaign against suicide terrorism – seen as a success in Israel – should be attributed to several factors: the reoccupation of the Palestinian cities in Operation Defensive Shield (April 2002), which enhanced the freedom of action on the part of the IDF and other security services in hunting down the perpetrators and their organizers and also significantly improved the level of intelligence gathering; the security barrier, which placed a physical obstacle in the path of suicide bombers on their way to Israeli cities; improvements in coordination and cooperation among the various Israeli security services; improved effectiveness in responses to warnings about terrorism infiltrations and significant reductions in the time necessary to apprehend suicide bombers before they achieved what they set out to do; and boosting the level of terrorists targeted for attack to organization leaders, thereby effecting deterrence.

Israel viewed the dramatic drop in suicide attacks as a concrete strategic goal incumbent on a state committed to the welfare and security of its citizens. In this sense, one may view the results of the military campaign against suicide terrorism as an unequivocal success. The steady drop in the number of suicide attacks from the large numbers, particularly in 2001 (35), 2002 (53), and 2003 (26), to zero in 2009-2010



**Figure 2.** Foiled suicide attacks, 2004-2009

Source: "Features of Terrorist Attacks in the Last Decade"

(as of October 2010), is definitive proof. Nonetheless, it is clear that the success in stopping the suicide attacks was success in dealing with capability rather than the motivation to attack Israel on the part of the suicide bombers and their dispatchers. In the years when there was a decrease in the number of suicide attacks in Israel, starting from 2004 onwards, there were still hundreds of Palestinian youths seeking to sacrifice their lives in the act of murdering Israelis (figure 2). Moreover, after the leading terrorist organizations understood that suicide attacks as a dramatic, lethal weapon were losing their efficacy and were incapable of changing the balance of power between the sides, and thus their cost outweighed their value, they tried to find other alternatives. This was clear in the announcement of the *tahadiya* (long term truce) in March 2005 and later in the organizations' recourse to Qassam rockets as their weapon of choice.

On the Palestinian side, opinions are divided as to the success of the second intifada in general and the rash of suicide bombings in particular. A prominent manifestation of this disagreement may be found in remarks made by PA head Abu Mazen who called the military dimension of the intifada and the abandonment of the Oslo political process an "historic blunder."<sup>9</sup> Even terrorists who participated in the intifada and dispatched suicide bombers have alluded to a rethinking of the way in which the



struggle was conducted, not on the basis of moral regrets but because of its cost and the tactical error in concentrating suicide terrorism inside Israel proper rather than directing it at soldiers and settlement residents, where attacks would have been viewed as more legitimate.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, there are elements that see the military campaign, and especially the steep cost to Israel's citizens, as a strategic success in that for the first time, Israel was forced to pay dearly for the extended occupation of the territories rather than simply enjoy its fruits.<sup>11</sup> Hamas' victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections, its mandate to form the Palestinian government, and its becoming a significant element in political life can largely – according to Hamas spokespeople – be interpreted as proof of the justness of the path it spearheaded while bearing the suicide terrorism banner. Therefore, Hamas may claim that although Israel did in fact win the military campaign on a tactical level against the Palestinian military uprising in general and suicide terrorism in particular, at the strategic level the victory belongs to Hamas and those who remained faithful to the path of *muqawama* (resistance).

It seems that for now Hamas has contained suicide terrorism and suspended its widespread use in favor of Qassam rocket attacks from the Gaza arena. Is this a tactical choice, the result of the heavy price paid by the organization in casualties and arrests, including the killing of senior personnel such as Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and his heir, Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi? Or, does it stem from the organization's decision to enter the political arena, which required it to suspend the use of brutal terrorism that would make it impossible for the organization to achieve any international political support or legitimacy? Most likely a combination of factors, constraints, and considerations is at work.

One of the major lessons that may be learned from the Palestinian suicide terrorism of the second intifada is that it is but one of many weapons in the large arsenal available to the Palestinians. Suicide bombing proved its effectiveness in murdering Israelis and wreaking havoc to public morale. The willingness among Palestinian youths to volunteer for such activity in the future has not dissipated and the potential for this weapon being unsheathed once again is there, should another round of violence in the region erupt as the result of an ongoing political deadlock or as the result of other organizational considerations. Despite the heavy toll incurred by the Palestinians because of suicide

terrorism, the decision to use it again remains the prerogative of the Palestinian organizations, whose use will certainly be affected by their understanding of the degree of support they can expect from the Palestinian public. The measure of success in deploying it as effectively as they did in the second intifada also depends on the ability of the Israeli government to apply the knowledge and experience accrued by Israel's security services during the successful struggle with suicide terrorism, which essentially ended the phenomenon around 2006.

### Notes

- 1 The start of the second intifada is well known: the confrontation broke out on September 29, 2000, after Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount, which was viewed by the Palestinians as an intentional provocation. However, the end date is unclear and has never been announced officially. In effect, the massive waves of violence ebbed gradually.
- 2 Yoram Schweitzer, "Palestinian Istishhadia: A Developing Instrument," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, no. 8 (2007): 667-89.
- 3 Within Islamic Jihad, this theoretical religious discussion already took place in the late 1980s; the decision to use this tactic was made before organization personnel started carrying it out in practice.
- 4 Matti Steinberg, *Taking Their Fate in Their Hands: Palestinian National Consciousness, 1967-2007* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot and Hemed Press, 2008), pp. 279-80.
- 5 Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, *The Seventh War: How We Won and Why We Lost the War with the Palestinians* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot and Hemed Books, 2004), pp. 77-82. Author interview with Ahmad Barghouti, March 14, 2005.
- 6 Author interview with Ahmad Barghouti, March 14, 2005; author interview with Nasser Abu Hameid, January 3, 2006.
- 7 Author interview with Ahmad Barghouti, March 14, 2005; author interview with Nasser Abu Hameid, January 3, 2006.
- 8 Mohammed M. Hafez and Joseph Hatfield, "Do Targeted Assassinations Work? A Multivariate Analysis of Israel's Controversial Tactic during Al-Aqsa Uprising," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (2006): 359-82. In their article Hafez and Hatfield defined the effective role played by the targeted killings in Israel's policy.
- 9 Roe Nahmias, "Abbas: 2nd intifada was a mistake," *Ynet*, May 26, 2010, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3894519,00.html/>.
- 10 Videotaped author interview with Thabath Mardawi, November 23, 2005.
- 11 Author interview with Abbas Sayad, January 10, 2005.