



Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Virtuous Heroines or Damaged Goods?¹

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Introduction

Although not a new phenomenon, suicide bombings by women attract a disproportionately large amount of media scrutiny and academic study in relation to suicide bombing as a whole. Possible explanations for the disproportionate attention that female suicide bombers receive include the seeming incongruity of women, symbols of fertility and the gift of life, intentionally taking the lives of others. Palestinian female suicide bombers, in particular, have received extensive coverage in the global media due to the relative ease of accessing their families for interviews following a bombing. Israeli policies, which allow media to obtain interviews with suicide bombers imprisoned after failing to complete their missions, have also increased their exposure.²

To date, approximately seventy Palestinian women are numbered as having been involved in suicide bombing attempts in Israel--ten of whom actually carried out an attack and died in the process. Indeed, notwithstanding the decline in Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel since the *tahadiya* (the unilateral temporary restraint that was announced in March 2005), two of the eleven suicide attacks were carried out by women. Both of these women were dispatched from Gaza in the span of less than a month. On November 6, 2006, Marwa Masoud, an eighteen year old student from the Islamic College in Gaza, blew herself up near a group of soldiers, killing herself and slightly wounding one soldier. A few weeks later, on November 23, another female

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suicide bomber, Fatma Omar al-Najar, a 57-year old grandmother with over 30 grandchildren, also detonated herself. Dispatched by Hamas, al-Najar was identified by IDF soldiers who shot at her and foiled her plan before she was able to inflict any casualties. In addition to the above, a female suicide bomber from the West Bank was apprehended on the way to carrying out an attack in an Israeli city. Moreover, recently published statements by five women associated with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad were suggestive of their intent to engage in such a mission in the future.

While initially the involvement of Palestinian women in suicide bombings was uniformly perceived as abnormal and a social aberration,³ with time, two opposing approaches have been posited in the media to explain such attacks. One approach, appearing primarily in the Arab and Muslim media, has cast female suicide bombers as heroines and pioneers. The more dominant and “western” approach has presented female suicide bombers as socially deviant and, in some measure, as “damaged goods.” This article seeks to present a more balanced view of the personal and environmental factors that propel Palestinian females to engage in suicide bombing and to understand their doing so within the context of the organizational interests that surround such bombings. Furthermore, and without questioning the inherent moral turpitude of the act, it challenges the perception that Palestinian female-suicide bombers are necessarily “damaged goods.” The article is largely based on interviews over a two and-a-half year period that were conducted by the author in Israeli prisons. The women interviewed either embarked on a failed suicide mission or served as chaperones to male suicide bombers. Male recruiters and dispatchers of the women were interviewed, as well.

Opposing Images: Virtuous Heroines or “Damaged Goods”

Palestinian female suicide bombers have typically been portrayed in the Arab and Muslim media as social heroines and role models. Poetic descriptions that emphasize their unique personality and divine qualities are standard. Typically, these women are described as bestowing pride and prestige on their people, their homeland, and the entire Muslim nation. They have been compared to glorified historical figures; for example, Wafa Idris, considered to be the pioneer among them, has been described as a modern Joan of Arc,⁴ as possessing the mysterious smile of Mona Lisa, and as a

Christ figure.⁵ Other Palestinian female suicide bombers have been presented as ideal women with supreme qualities of purity, beauty, piety, and rare brilliance.⁶ The Arab media have not only praised their acts as unmatched heroism but have called upon men to learn from these women and join the struggle to liberate occupied Arab land and restore Islamic pride.⁷

Against their characterization as heroines, mainly Western writers have characterized the women who embark on such missions as "not whole" women and, even, social outcasts. Within this framing, female suicide bombers are sometimes portrayed as being forcibly recruited for their missions, since to engage in such violence is outside the boundaries, which define their gender roles. By going on a suicide mission, women are seen as breaching the accepted moral norms of their conservative societies, especially when it comes to gender relations. The "aberrant" role that the woman adopts and the woman's "defects" are the basis for characterizing her as "damaged goods"--the social and personal "defects" include her being unmarried at a relatively advanced age, being divorced or barren, or having had sexual relations before marriage or an affair during marriage. Other "shortcomings" include belonging to families that carry with them the stain of collaboration, which obligates the woman's sacrifice in order to cleanse the family name. Another anomaly might be a physical defect that lowers a woman's desirability as a wife and prevents her from fulfilling her traditional destiny as a married woman and as a child-bearer. According to this view, the dominant motivation of the woman to sacrifice herself under the banner of the national religious cause is her "defect".

A most prominent example of the "damaged goods" framing by western media is the recurring reference to Wafa Idris' inability to bear children. Considered to be the first Palestinian female suicide bomber, many attributed Idris' suicide to psychological motives that were caused by her personal circumstances. Idris was married at age sixteen to her cousin and was unable to conceive. After nine years of marriage, her husband divorced her and married another woman. Mira Tzoreff, an Israeli researcher, claims that, "while much has been written explaining Idris' deed ideologically, testimony of her friends and family strongly suggests that the

motivation for her suicide was personal rather than national or religious. Idris' status as a divorced and barren woman, and her return as a dependant to her parents' home where she became an economic burden, put her in a dead-end situation in a traditional, patriarchal society."⁸ A similar social/personal explanation was given by American journalist Barbara Victor. She too implied that Idris had been driven to her act mainly because she was divorced and barren. Her husband's marriage to another woman, and that marriage resulting in the birth of his child shortly thereafter, was said to bestow an unbearable shame on her at the Ramallah camp in which she lived.⁹ Victor argued that only as a result of her growing depression combined with her religious and nationalistic ideals, did Idris find the reason and determination to carry out the attack.¹⁰

Victor's book, *Army of Roses*, published in 2003, gained prominence by virtue of it being the first major work on female Palestinian suicide bombers. It describes the story of a relatively small number of women who blew themselves up and a female chaperone of a male suicide bomber. The book received widespread attention and went far to advance the idea that the women who participated in these acts both had few social or personal prospects and were taken advantage of by the militant organizations that preyed on their vulnerability.

In this context, Victor tells the story of Darin Abu Aisha, a student of English literature from the al-Najah University in Nablus, who blew herself up in a car at a roadblock in Israel in February 2002. Aisha died in the attack and her two male chaperones, also in the car, were injured, as were two Israeli policemen. Aisha is presented by Victor as a brilliant woman trapped by her parents' and societies' expectations that she marry in conflict with her own personal and academic aspirations. According to Victor, the dilemma lay at the basis of her decision to pursue a path of self-sacrifice in the name of the nation and God.

Victor writes that Aisha suffered social pressure due to her being (already) twenty-two years old and still unmarried. Victor quotes Samira, Aisha's cousin, as saying, "Sometimes people teased her and called her names because she refused to marry and have children. Her parents suffered because of this. Now they are better because they realize she had other, more important plans....She knew that her destiny

was to become the bride of Allah in Paradise."¹¹ According to her close friend, Aisha knew that "her fate as a Palestinian woman was sealed--an arranged marriage, six or seven children, a husband who probably wouldn't have the same hopes or curiosity about life as she did."¹² She was depressed and desperate since she knew that she would be forced to marry her cousin, whom she was ordered to kiss publicly by Israeli soldiers at a roadblock. This event supposedly obligated a marriage between the two since the act was performed before many people and rumor about it had spread; Aisha had been aware of the fact that her refusal to marry with her cousin would cast a stain upon her family.¹³

Another female suicide bomber, Ayat al-Akhras, an 18-year old from Dehaisha, was dispatched by a Fatah cell to commit suicide in Kiryat Yovel, Jerusalem, in March 2002. The suicide attack at the supermarket killed two Israelis, including a girl her age. Akhras is presented as someone who sacrificed herself in order to save her family and in order to remove the suspicion of treason that surrounded her father's work with Israelis. Victor here quotes Akhras' friend in explaining Akhras' sentiments: "She told me there was only one chance to save her family from disgrace....and that was to become a martyr. By then there was talk around the camp that her father was going to be lynched and their home destroyed. There was no way out for the family."¹⁴

Another girl referred to as "Zina" in Victor's book, was the chaperone of a male suicide bomber who blew himself up at the Sbarro Pizza store in Jerusalem, in August 2001. Fifteen Israelis were killed and dozens of people were injured in that attack. "Zina" is presented by Victor as a naïve person who was manipulated by her operator and married lover with the promise of a shared eternal life in heaven. Victor also reported that "Zina" gave birth to a son outside of wedlock and that the son was taken from her by her parents. "Zina" was sent from Jordan to the West Bank in order to cover the disgrace. The loss of her child and the promise of her operator/lover to marry her are presented as the events that propelled her to agree to undertake the mission¹⁵.

Victor's claims are echoed by Anat Berko, an Israeli researcher who interviewed female suicide bombers in Israeli prisons and asserted that none of the seven women who had "exploded" (this number has since grown to ten) could be defined as "normative" within the bounds of Palestinian society.¹⁶ Berko even quotes an Arab-Israeli journalist who accompanied her and described one of the female suicide bombers with the harsh statement "not a shahida but a whore", referring to the woman's illicit relationship with a male. In other words, the bomber was not a woman who died in the name of Allah, but rather, just a prostitute. He added that "it was preferable for her to die rather than be murdered, and as she also took a few soldiers with her, all her sins were forgotten."¹⁷ Kimhi and Even have called this type of suicide bomber the "Exploited Type".¹⁸

Especially given that the pool of successful and would-be female suicide-bombers has grown vastly since some of these books and articles were published, it is fitting to examine the validity of the all-encompassing generalization about these women through direct interviews with those who carried out their mission and survived, those who did not carry out their mission, the dispatchers of the women, and the families of the women.

Dispatchers of Female Suicide Bombers

Some of the interviews that I conducted in Israeli prisons over a span of two and a half years were with the dispatchers of female suicide bombers who died.¹⁹ Wafa Idris' dispatcher is still unidentified, but among many of the still-imprisoned Fatah members whom I spoke with, the accepted opinion is that Wafa Idris was not dispatched for a suicide mission but rather to just place an explosive device. It is unclear whether Idris was the victim of a work accident or if she ultimately decided to activate the explosive device on her own. The question, however, did not prevent the cultivation of the myth, which came to surround her, nor the explanations regarding her personal problems.

In a series of interviews with Aisha's dispatcher²⁰ who claimed to have conducted a number of conversations with the woman prior to dispatching her, and

also relied on the account of his fiancée who was Aisha's close friend, there were no traces of the motives Victor mentions. Indeed, it is not possible to completely rule out that Aisha had hidden her "true" motives from him or that he purposely avoided talking about them. However, the dispatcher presents the image of a normative, educated, and intelligent young woman who decided to carry out an attack due to the difficult personal circumstances of her life and her nationalist grievances. Aisha's male cousin, whom she was close to, was also dispatched on a suicide mission by the same dispatcher. Aisha reportedly became obsessed with getting the dispatcher to send her on a mission. According to the dispatcher, Aisha was determined to realize her death through an attack against Israel. When he rejected her many requests, she threatened that she would carry out an attack against soldiers with a knife, even if that would mean her death at their hands. That she would likely not harm any Israelis by doing so, Aisha asserted that her fruitless death would be on his conscience. In the end—and as the dispatcher had been searching for revenge for his friend's death as well as revenge for the elimination of two leading Palestinian activists by Israel—the dispatcher overcame his initial decision and "surrendered" to her determination. According to what he claims to have heard from her, Aisha's main motive in carrying out a suicide attack was a mixture of deep personal trauma stemming from circumstances affecting herself, her family, and those close to her. Aisha was also said to perceive the acts of her cousin and Wafa Idris as models for emulation.

In interviews that were conducted with Ayat al-Akhras' cell leader,²¹ as well as a few of his men, including the driver²² who escorted Akhras to the site where she carried out her mission, there was no evidence that the main motive for her act was a desire to remove the stain cast upon her family—what Victor contended. It is once again possible that Akhras wanted to camouflage her true motive; a personal motive would of course defile her and her dispatchers and cast the mission, not as an act of self-sacrifice in the service of God (*istishhad*)—a legitimate act in the eyes of many Palestinians—but as an act of "regular" suicide (*intikhar*), which is forbidden in Islam. According to interviews held with different members of the cell involved in the mission, Akhras, like Aisha, also turned to a cell commander a number of times but was initially rejected because she was a woman. In the case of Akhras, the commander reported that Akhras was angry about being refused and told him that he

did not have the right to decide for her what she should do with her life. She, too, threatened that she would carry out the attack by herself anyway.

When the commander finally accepted her request, he explained his acquiescence as the only way to smuggle a suicide bomber into Israel, since at that time men were not allowed in. Furthermore, he wanted to send a message to other Arab countries and the entire world that even women were participating in the struggle, and strove to spark interest in the reasons that women felt impelled to carry out suicide attacks. According to him, this was an especially significant message, and the proof of this lay in the fact that the entire world was interested in this case. He knew what message needed to be broadcast and projected to have a great influence on the Arab world. He therefore wrote the testimony that Akhras videotaped before her death.²³

Henadi Jaradat detonated herself in the Maxim restaurant in Haifa in October 2004 leaving 21 dead and dozens wounded. In a series of interviews,²⁴ Jaradat's dispatcher rejected the claim that Jaradat had committed her suicide attack as a result of being unwed at 29. Jaradat was described by him as a special young woman, very strong in her personality ("like a man"), with a serious mind. She benefited from a higher education that she had acquired in Jordan. According to him, she did not marry, due only to her sense of responsibility toward her family. He stated that she was responsible for the family's income since her father was a cancer patient. She postponed her personal plans so her brother could marry first and then planned to marry her fiancé. Jaradat's dispatcher also rejected the claim that, since her fiancé was married, he was in fact her lover (and herein lies the hint that she was not normative). He said that the possibility of Jaradat and her fiancée having had premarital relations was unlikely in their society. "What drove her to commit suicide was anger and revenge over her brother and fiancé having been killed. In one moment everything was destroyed for her and in return she wanted to destroy for what they had done to her. Her idea was that they had ruined her life and thus she had to ruin life totally – this was pure revenge."²⁵ He claimed that a large and central part of her decision was the desire for revenge and another part of it was based on religion. "She was from a religious family, grew up on religion, read the Quran. After the death of her fiancé

²³ Interviews with Ahmed Mugarbi, October 6, 9, 26, 2005.

²⁴ Interviews with Amjad Ubeidi, January 21, 2005, November 2, 2005.

²⁵ Interview with Amjad Ubeidi, November 2, 2005.

and the useless death of her brother who had no involvement in the conflict, she became highly sensitized to the idea that death could come to you at any place, even in your home, and unexpectedly. Every person's fate was determined by God and whatever one did, God would decide whether you die or live and she decided that she wanted to die at that time. We will all die at some point and it is preferable that we cause our enemies deaths on their side."²⁶ Jaradat's act can be seen as a striking example of the deadliest combination of sheer desire for personal revenge wrapped in nationalistic and religious terms. It seems to also reinforce Speckhard's perception that personal trauma is a central cause that drives female (as well as male) suicide bombers to their act of self sacrifice--it produces a calming effect on their difficult emotional states and is an answer to the pain they cannot bear. Their refuge is found in relocating the personal pain to the nationalistic religious path.²⁷

Interviews with Failed Female Suicide Bombers

My findings are based on 17 interviews that were held with jailed women, eleven of whom were suicide bombers caught prior to having realized their mission, and two were chaperones of male suicide bombers. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 17 to 44. Most of the women had completed high school and some went further in their education. Most were single, though one woman was divorced with a child and another was the mother of four. The women that were interviewed were chosen entirely at random due to the shifting availability of prisoners and prison circumstances, which prevented systematic selection. The random nature of these interviews is a common and unavoidable constraint in the field of interviewing terrorists in general, and suicide bombers, in particular. For most of the women I interviewed, their involvement in a suicide attack was their first and only experience of committing a serious violent act and most were not previously affiliated with a militant organization. Together, these interviews suggest that a diverse set of motives drove the women to volunteer for this type of activity and, as has been argued with respect to their male counterparts, they claimed to have been driven by a deep sense of altruism, with deep nationalistic, and sometimes, religious roots. Among the women interviewed, some stressed religious reasons as the primary and distinct

²⁶ Interview with Amjad Ubeidi on January 24, 2005.

²⁷ Speckhard Anne (2005). "Understanding Suicide Terrorism: Countering Human Bombs and Their Senders", *Topics in Terrorism: Toward a Transatlantic Consensus on the Nature of the Threat* (Vol. I) Eds. Jason S. Purcell and Joshua D. Weintraub, Atlantic Council Publication

motive for their actions, while others expressed a desire to harm the Israelis in purely nationalistic terms. There were also cases that seemed to be classic examples of exploitation of the women's weaknesses in a manner that indeed correlated with the notion of "damaged goods".

Wafa Idris, whether or not she committed a premeditated suicide attack, was not the first Palestinian to volunteer for such a mission. A 20 year-old named "Naima," was dispatched in 1987 to drive an explosives-filled car in front of Israeli government offices in Jerusalem. When interviewed²⁸ nearly twenty years later, "Naima" stated that her motivation to commit an attack was "irregular" in the context of the Palestinian struggle of the 80s. By her own account, "Naima," was a devout and excellent student who decided that she wanted to participate in the struggle to free her birthplace and therefore joined the religious faction that operated within Fatah. "Naima," was part of a large family, and one of her brothers, to whom she was especially attached, was killed during a clash with the IDF. From her account, I was not able to identify any type of social or personal defect that could potentially have driven her to her act. From her current and more mature perspective, she asserted that what drove her to embrace such a mission was a blazing religious faith. Back then she believed that it was the right path toward fulfilling her religious and nationalistic duty. However, she elaborated that while still possessing the potent religious and nationalistic sentiments from her past, she would presently choose an alternative means to express her protest and beliefs. Naima," described her mood preceding the planned attack as follows: "I was constantly praying and asking God that the time for 'work' would arrive in order for me to be able to do it for Him. The most important thing for me was that I wouldn't commit any sin of foreign desire like heroism or revenge. Only for God. I felt like a young woman looking forward to a meeting with her beloved. I didn't even think about heaven. It was like wanting to think about a man that you would be close to. I was ready for it even if God would have put me in hell. I was ready provided that I would be close to Him. I wanted to be sure that I wouldn't be tempted by the devil that would steer me away from the pure thought of being with God."

In interviews with three women from the Islamic Student Union (the student offshoot of Islamic Jihad), two of whom were to be dispatched on suicide missions by

²⁸ Interview with "Naima," June 19, 2006.

Islamic Jihad, religious faith was cited as the main motivation. At the head of the group was the "recruiter,"²⁹ "Mariam," an honor student from al-Najah University and an active member of the Islamic Jihad student union. In 2003, after having assisted in transporting explosives for the organization, "Mariam's" operators proposed that she should commit a suicide attack on their behalf. "Mariam" refused, claiming she was afraid that her parents, who had labored to build their home and were in a difficult financial situation, would have their home damaged, and she added, "everyone has his/her role." However, she did volunteer to arrange for other female suicide bombers to take such steps in her place. To this end, she turned to two of her friends who she thought would be willing to carry out an attack.

The first girl she turned to was "Zahara", a 19-year-old from a Kabatia religious family. "Zahara", was born in Saudi Arabia and lived there until the age of ten, whereupon her family moved to Jordan and from there to the West Bank. In an interview, "Zahara"³⁰ said that the idea to commit a suicide attack preoccupied her for a long time while she was pursuing her religious studies. Through her studies she came to the conclusion that sacrificing her life was the most exalted and obligatory duty of every Muslim. She said that this was especially due to the situation with Israel and to the "oppression of the Muslims in the world." Zahara's parents' suspicions about her intentions served to restrict her activities and prevented her from undertaking the attack.

With the urgent need to recruit another girl to volunteer for the attack, "Mariam" turned to "Karima", another female student³¹ among her friends, who agreed to carry out the attack. "Karima" also cited religious motives as a primary factor. After she was petitioned by her friend, she reportedly prayed and did *istikhara* (a prayer that helps the person praying to sense whether the act he is considering is wanted by God). She decided to respond affirmatively and pursue what she deemed to be the path of God (*fi sabil Allah*). The arrests of the men who stood behind the planning led to the arrest of the recruiter and a short time thereafter to the arrest of the two potential female suicide bombers. As a result, the plot was thwarted.

²⁹ Interview with "Mariam," January 8, 2004.

³⁰ Interview with "Zahara," April 2006.

³¹ Interview with "Karima," January 8, 2004.

"Najwa", a female suicide bomber³² who was dispatched by Fatah to carry out an attack in a central Israeli city, regretted her decision at the last moment. In a series of conversations with her dispatchers (members of the same cell that had sent Ayat al-Akhras), the image of a normal, educated and articulate 20-year-old girl (when she volunteered for the attack) emerged. "Najwa" made her decision to undertake a suicide mission following the killing of her close friend. This highly traumatic event, combined with a constant sense of humiliation and frustration that she, her friends, and nation were forced to endure caused her to want to act. However, in the interviews I conducted with "Najwa", she fiercely denied that her motive for the mission was personal revenge. "Najwa" explained that her actions were in response to Israel's actions and based on her sense that there were no alternative way of responding except with force against Israel. Of several failed female suicide bombers, "Najwa" came closest to realizing her intention. One can argue that her account is endowed with an even greater authenticity, by virtue of the independence she exhibited in exercising her own wishes against those of her handler's.

Though "Najwa's" personal history suggests its fair share of hardships: her father died when she was six months old, her mother did not remarry until she was 10, and she was raised in the home of her aunt and grandmother, these circumstances, while unfortunate, are not uncommon for many Palestinian families. Indeed, "Najwa" described her childhood and adolescence as happy and protected. She described the personal freedom that she had enjoyed at school, which included learning foreign languages (English and German), until the escalation of security measures came at the end of 2000, due to the political situation. The negative aspects of Najwa's childhood, in and of themselves, did not make her fit to be designated as a "damaged goods".

In an interview with the woman referred to as "Zina" in Victor's book, nothing pointed to a son born out of wedlock or an affair with her dispatcher, Darlas.³³ Victor

³² Interview with "Najwa," March 2, 8, 22, 2005.

³³ On November 21, 2006 there was an additional inquiry into the prior interviews that had been conducted with the dispatcher ("lover") Darlas, via an imprisoned trusted member of Hamas. In the interview he insisted that his relationship with "Zina" did not exceed the bounds of the operational

argued that the two together were the motive behind "Zina" volunteering to be the first Hamas female fighter to personally commit an attack and was later the chaperone of male suicide bomber. "Zina", by her own account a religious girl, was impelled by a mixture of nationalistic and religious motives. The personal background that she reported included a life in Jordan and moving to the home of her relatives in the occupied territories. This process of seeing wounded Palestinians and experiencing a sense of opposition led to her increased political awareness and active involvement in protests against Israel. According to "Zina", the violence that Israel waged against the Palestinians demanded an especially violent counterattack. Hence, her great disappointment when, on her first mission, the rigged beer can that she had placed in a Jerusalem supermarket did not cause any injuries. Thus, her immense joy when the suicide attack that she was involved in as a chaperone caused 15 deaths.³⁴

Irrespective of whether "Zina" had a child out of wedlock or had an affair with her operator, the filmed interview I conducted with her shows her to be an educated and opinionated young woman who, in the spirit of Islam and its decrees, clearly articulates the reasons that justify committing violence against Israel. Her hatred of Israel and her desire for revenge were expressed with self-control and chilling tranquility, as were her descriptions of what went through her heart as she returned home from the scene of the suicide bombing. She said that she longed to hear of the number of deaths that she was party to, especially in light of her disappointment with the outcome of her first attack in which she acted alone. The quality of "Zina's" interpersonal skills, illustrated by her status in the Israeli prison as a spokesperson and representative for the female prisoners with prison authorities, makes it difficult to perceive her as "damaged goods" or as someone who was used unknowingly by others.

"Jamila"³⁵, an interviewee who escorted a male suicide bomber to Jerusalem where he killed two Israelis and wounded tens of others is a married woman and mother of four children. Even though in her biography it is also possible to find the loss of a father at a young age and a marriage at the age of 14, she is not to be

connection and he claimed that since she had been engaged the notion never even crossed his mind according to the strict codes that exist in their society regarding such matters.

³⁴ Interview with "Zina" April 18th 2006

³⁵ Interview with "Jamila," April 2, 2006.

perceived as being socially aberrant. "Jamila" claimed that she did not initially intend to be a suicide bomber or assist one. The risk that she brought upon herself hiding wanted people and transporting arms for Palestinian militant groups, however, seemed to naturally progress toward taking the risk associated with escorting a male suicide bomber. For "Jamila", acting as such was the obvious thing to do in the struggle that her people were waging.

"Damara",³⁶ another potential female suicide bomber, was a 30-year-old divorcee and a mother of a ten-year-old girl, when I interviewed her (she was 26 when she undertook her mission). "Damara's" decision to commit a suicide attack grew out of the increased suffering of Palestinians she witnessed and the security escalation that intensified it. The escalation was largely a result of Operation Defensive Shield that followed the March 2002 chain of suicide attacks—the suicide attacks were in reaction to IDF forces targeting suicide bomber dispatchers living in the West Bank. "Damara" described her life before the outbreak of the second intifada as "good", both financially and personally. She explained that her divorce took place with her consent and to her satisfaction, and that she did not feel lacking because of it. She peacefully continued her life with her daughter and extended family in the large complex in which they lived until the violence around her intensified and became unbearable.

My interview with "Damara" revealed the emotional distress that she experienced related to the killing around her. "Damara's" younger brother had volunteered to perform a suicide attack that, in the end, did not come to fruition. The security closure and pressure around her and the increase in suicide attacks committed by people from her camp--foremost among them, the suicide attack on the first night of Passover (March 27, 2002) that caused the deaths of 30 Israelis and the injuries of dozens more--was an inspiration to her and provided her with the final push to choose the path of a suicide attack.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that there are a considerable number of cases in which the main reason for selecting a woman was due to her having physical "defects" or "a lower social image". For example, Wafa al-Bas was a 21-year-old girl from Gaza whose body was badly burnt. She underwent a series of treatments in

³⁶ Interview with "Damara," April 19, 2006.

Israel and was dispatched to commit a suicide attack there on June 20, 2005. Although al-Bas refused to speak with me directly on the advice of her prison friends who wanted to protect her from "the media," several of these same friends were willing to clarify the process of her recruitment. After she had suffered her burns, al-Bas was asked through the mediation of a female acquaintance if, due to her difficult personal situation, she would like to carry out a suicide attack that would award her great respect. al-Bas ostensibly replied positively, yet the acquaintance claims that she did not attribute importance and seriousness to what al-Bas said. This friend, whose brother was a member of Tanzim, invited al-Bas home to meet with a group of Fatah operatives who asked her if she was indeed willing to perform the attack. al-Bas was allegedly nervous, though replied in the affirmative; they also told her that since she had seen them and was able to identify them that she did not have the option of regretting her decision. Indeed, al-Bas was ordered to blow herself up if she was discovered in order to ensure that she would not lead the authorities to those who sent her on her mission. This was the explanation al-Bas gave to her friends in prison when asked why she activated the explosive device, though it was clear that she had been discovered and was trapped within an area in which she could not harm Israeli security.³⁷ The short film in which Wafa al-Bas is shown being held at a distance from others, yet pressing the activation switch on the explosive belt she was wearing, received widespread media coverage. Her action was framed as revealing the irrationality of suicide attacks.

"Suaha",³⁸ a 38-year old single woman with burn marks on her face and hands needed ongoing medical treatments and was apparently not on the course to marriage and motherhood. In my interview with "Suaha", I got the impression that her difficult physical situation, in combination with the fact that she was dependent on receiving transit permits for treatment from Fatah members in the Palestinian Authority, aided in influencing her to carry out a suicide attack. In the interview, she spoke of her motives in nationalist terms--the struggle against the occupation and the desire for revenge against Israelis--but she also admitted that she had dreamt of reaching heaven and being one of the beautiful *khuriyat al-ain* ("virgins of heaven").

³⁷ Conversation on April 18, 2006.

³⁸ Interview with "Suaha", April 25, 2006.

Similar instances of what clearly seem to be cases of exploiting the weakness and defects of miserable women are found in the attempts to dispatch Faiza Amal Jumaa and "Nazima" Jumaa. Faiza, a 35-year old woman whose appearance and behavior suggest a woman trapped in a man's body, volunteered herself as a suicide bomber for Hamas.³⁹ "Nazima" stated that she was coerced to commit a suicide attack by placing grenades on her body.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The growing number of female suicide bombers and especially, Palestinian women who are caught on their way to an attack or in the advanced stages of one, presents an important research opportunity for understanding the motivations and circumstances leading women who undertake a suicide mission. Sweeping generalizations which advance the idea that Palestinian women largely pursue suicide attacks because they are "damaged goods" on the one hand, or because they possess super-human personality traits on the other, complicates the understanding of the phenomenon. From personal conversations conducted with female suicide bombers who failed to complete an attack, it is clear that they are neither "abnormal" nor do they possess meta-human qualities.

From interviews with the women and dispatchers who sent women, and were also imprisoned, it becomes clear that a variety of motives influenced the women to choose the path they did. For quite a few of them, being viewed as "damaged goods" by the society around them, or in their own eyes, was not the main prompt. Both phrased the women's motives in nationalistic and religious terms. Additional motives that were mentioned by the women were revenge and the desire to prove to Israel that Palestinians could fight back and force Israel to pay for the suffering that it had caused the Palestinians. Many of the women stated that they believed that a suicide attack was the only way open to them to take part in their national struggle. These arguments have likewise been heard many times from failed male suicide bombers who were not members of organizations and who did not possess any skill in using arms.

³⁹ Smadar Peri, "A Female Suicide Bomber," *Yediot Ahronot*, June 18, 2004.

⁴⁰ Berko *On the Way to Heaven*, pp. 20-25.

Given the traditional and conservative nature of Palestinian society, the choice by women to carry out suicide attacks, or for the men who set up such operations to dispatch them, was not simple. Though the dispatcher's initial reservations were overcome enough to send the women, there remained a sense of discomfort about sending women on these types of missions.⁴¹

The recent suicide bombing by a 57-year old grandmother did not only set a new record for age by suicide bombers but also represents another question mark regarding the proposition that women who agree to carry out suicide missions are socially anomalous in some important way and have little chance of fitting into the social fabric of the community. This is not to say that female suicide bombers, like their male counterparts, are not exploited. The situational weaknesses of the potential suicide bombers, even those who volunteered for their missions (and certainly those who were coerced into these actions), are neither disregarded nor channeled to less destructive ends. Instead, they are seized upon and aggravated by those dispatching them for greater organizational purposes.

Since the phenomenon of suicide bombing in the service of terrorist organizations is widening across the globe, and women are being turned to more and more to carry out such missions, it is important not to misrepresent women's motives. Inaccurate stereotypes make it difficult to find effective ways to combat female suicide bombing and direct the women to alternative nonviolent expressions of protest and opposition. Most of all, defusing this phenomenon requires attention to the greater organizational context of suicide bombers and those who sponsor them.

Endnotes

¹ Yoram Schweitzer, "Introduction," in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying For Equality?* ed. Yoram Schweitzer, Memorandum no. 84, Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, 2006, p. 7.

² For example: Harvey Gordon, 'The suicide Bomber: Is it a Psychiatric Phenomenon?' *Psychiatric Bulletin*, Vol. 26, (2002), p. 285-287; Kaja Perina, 'Suicide Terrorism - Seeking Motives Beyond Mental Illness', *Psychology Today*, (January 9,

⁴¹Yoram Schweitzer, "Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Reality vs. Myth," in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying For Equality?* pp. 28-30.

2002), p. 15; Jerrold M. Post, 'Killing in the Name of God: Osama Bin Laden and Radical Islam', Paper presented at the International Society of Political Psychology, 25th Annual Scientific Meeting, Berlin, Germany, (July 16-19, 2002)

³ Raphael Israeli, "Palestinian Women: The Quest for a Voice in the Public Square through 'Islamikaze Martyrdom,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 1 (2004): 86.

Israeli, p. 87. ⁴

Cindy D. Ness, "In the Name of the Cause: Women's Work in Secular and Religious ⁵ Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28 (2005): 366.

⁶ Memri, Wafa Idris: A Female Suicide Bomber", February 5th 2002

⁷ Mira Tzoreff, "The Palestinian *Shahida*: National Patriotism, Islamic Feminism, or Social Crisis," in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying For Equality?* pp. 19-20.

⁸ Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*. Rodale Press, 2003, p. 50.

⁹ Victor, *Army of Roses*, p. 46.

Victor, *Army of Roses*, p. 100. ¹⁰

Victor, *Army of Roses*, p. 104. ¹¹

¹² Victor, *Army of Roses*, p. 109.

Victor, *Army of Roses*, pp. 208. ¹³

Victor, *Army of Roses*, pp 134, 140 ¹⁴

¹⁵ Anat Berko, *On the Way to Heaven: The World of Female and Male Suicide Bombers and Their Dispatchers*. Tel Aviv: Miskal, Yediot Ahronot Books and Hemed Books, 2004, p. 22.

¹⁶ Berko, *On the Way to Heaven*, p.20.

¹⁷ Shaul Kimhi & Shemuel Even, Who are the Palestinian suicide bombers? *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16, 2004, p. 815-840.

¹⁸ To protect the privacy of those women who failed to complete their missions, I have assigned them false names. Those who completed their missions have already been exposed, and hence the willingness to disclose the names of the men who sent them.

¹⁹ Interviews conducted with Naser Shawish, January 19, 23, 24 2005

²⁰ Interviews with Ahmed Mugrabi, October 6, 9, 26, 2005.

²⁰ Interviews with Ibrahim Sarhne, November 14, 2005.

- ²² Interviews with Ahmed Mugrabi, October 6, 9, 26, 2005.
- ²³ Interviews with Amjad Ubeidi, January 21, 2005, November 2, 2005.
- ²⁴ Interview with Amjad Ubeidi, November 2, 2005.
- ²⁵ Interview with Amjad Ubeidi on January 24, 2005.
- ²⁶ Speckhard Anne (2005). "Understanding Suicide Terrorism: Countering Human Bombs and Their Senders", *Topics in Terrorism: Toward a Transatlantic Consensus on the Nature of the Threat* (Vol. I) Eds. Jason S. Purcell and Joshua D. Weintraub, Atlantic Council Publication
- ²⁷ Interview with Naima," June 19, 2006.
- ²⁸ Interview with "Mariam," January 8, 2004.
- ²⁹ Interview with "Zahara," April 2006.
- ³⁰ Interview with "Karima," January 8, 2004.
- ³¹ Interview with "Najwa," March 2, 8, 22, 2005.
- ³² On November 21, 2006 there was an additional inquiry into the prior interviews that had been conducted with the dispatcher ("lover") Darlas, via an imprisoned trusted member of Hamas. In the interview he insisted that his relationship with "Zina" did not exceed the bounds of the operational connection and he claimed that since she had been engaged the notion never even crossed his mind according to the strict codes that exist in their society regarding such matters.
- Interview with "Zina" April 18th 2006 ³³
- ³⁴ Interview with "Jamila," April 2, 2006.
- ³⁵ Interview with "Damara," April 19, 2006.
- ³⁶ Conversation on April 18, 2006.
- ³⁷ Interview with "Suaha," April 25, 2006.
- ³⁸ Smadar Peri, "A Female Suicide Bomber," *Yediot Ahronot*, June 18, 2004.
- ³⁹ Berko *On the Way to Heaven*, pp. 20-25.
- ⁴⁰ Yoram Schweitzer, "Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Reality vs. Myth," in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying For Equality?* pp. 28-30.

