

Suicide Attacks: Israel and Islamic Terrorism

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Hamas and the Emergence of Suicide Attacks

Immediately following its establishment in December 1987, and only a few days after the outbreak of the first *intifada*, Hamas adopted *jihad* – struggle – against Israel as its organizational basis. In its charter of August 1988, the movement declared that “*jihad* is the way, and death in the name of Allah is its most exalted aspiration.” Nor could there be any mincing of words: participation in *jihad* for the liberation of Palestine, the organization noted, “is a personal obligation incumbent on every Muslim when an enemy steals any of the lands of the Muslims. Given the Jews’ theft of Palestine, the flag of *jihad* must be unfurled[.]”

The signing of the Oslo accords in 1993 presented Hamas with its greatest challenge then to date. The organization had to choose between its existing ideology, which categorically rejected any *rapprochement* or peace with Israel, and the political need for a pragmatic stance, dictated by the popularity with which the accords were received by the Palestinian public. Ultimately, the Hamas came down against the agreements. Seeking to foil the Oslo Accords, its leaders joined nine other Palestinian organizations opposed to

the recognition of Israel, and forming an opposition bloc against Palestinian Authority (PA) Yasir Chairman Arafat. Simultaneously, Hamas decided to intensify its terrorist campaign against Israel.

The opposition bloc did not last long, however. Difference in the organizations’ various ideologies made it impossible for them to find even a minimum of common ground. In the end, the only factor uniting such sharply divergent groups as the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Islamist groups like the Hamas was their opposition to Oslo; this was not a sufficient basis for the long-term.

Hamas leaders then redoubled their efforts. Foiling the implementation of the Oslo Accords, they believed, would require a more vigorous approach. Accordingly, in late 1993-early 1994, Hamas altered the terms of reference within which it framed the struggle against Israel. Rather than merely *jihad* (roughly, dedication of the soul), the organization now advocated *istishihad* (willing sacrifice of the soul). In more concrete terms, this transition reflected a clear escalation: while *jihad* imposed certain limitations on the organization’s potential range of actions, *istishihad* did not. The goal

was now clear – causing severe casualties to Israel, which would disrupt day-to-day life in the country and bring about a collapse of the agreements. The era of suicide attacks was thus born – a tactic as lethal as it was simple to execute, and difficult to prevent.

Islam and Suicide

There is at present no supreme body in Islam whose rulings would be considered binding on each and every Muslim. While Islamic law clearly forbids suicide for personal reasons, the case of suicide in the service of *jihad* is more complex. Moreover, many radicals look in askance upon mainstream Islamic institutions, which they see as serving corrupted regimes that have strayed from Islam’s true path. For this reason, even the mufti of Cairo’s Al-Azhar University, which many consider Sunni Islam’s most august body, would be unable to issue a universally-accepted and obeyed religious ruling against suicide.

Instead, the various Islamic movements and organizations have each appointed religious leaders of their own. In the context of suicide attacks against Israel, it is worth recalling a sermon delivered in March 1996 by one of Sunni Islam’s most

prominent religious arbiters, Sheikh Yussuf Al-Kardawi, and broadcast live on Qatari television. In his sermon, Sheikh Al-Kardawi established that the suicide attacks carried out by Hamas in Jerusalem, Ashkelon, and Tel Aviv (in February-March, 1996, killing 60 Israelis) were to be considered *jihad* for the sake of Allah rather than terrorism, and that those who were killed carrying out these attacks were acting "to protect land and honor against the Israelis who had stolen Palestine." The attackers themselves were thus not to be judged as suicides but rather as *shahids*, or martyrs.

Al-Kardawi's sermon gave suicide attacks an important religious-legal impetus. Moreover, this was neither the first nor the last such decision: Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin had already (in March 1995) established that any suicide attacker that had received the blessing of an authorized Muslim sheikh was to be considered a martyr for *jihad*.

A Chronicle of Suicides – Characteristics and Trends

The first recorded suicide attack in the Palestinian-Israeli context was carried out on April 16, 1993, near the settlement of Mechola in the Jordan Valley. Driving a car packed with explosives, the attacker blew himself up, killing one Israeli and injuring seven. This attack actually predated the signing of the Oslo accords by several months; additional attacks would follow (and indeed, would at times become common), but only following the signing of the accords.

From 1993 to 1996, there were three major waves of suicide attacks. The first followed on the heels of the signing of the Oslo accords in September 1993. The second followed Baruch Goldstein's massacre of Muslim worshippers in Hebron's Tomb of the Patriarchs in February 1994. The third and final wave in this period followed Israel's killing of Yihye Ayyash (known to many as "the engineer") in January 1996.

Some 149 attacks have been carried out since April 1993, of which 102 were carried out after September 2000.

This third wave (February-March 1996) was both the shortest and the bloodiest then to date. Two attacks were carried out against Egged Bus No. 18 in Jerusalem (February 25, 1996 and March 3, 1996), killing 25 and 17, respectively. A third attack outside of Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Center (March 4, 1996) killed another 13 people. Mounting casualties led to increased pressure on the PA and Chairman Arafat. In response, Arafat made a first-ever strategic decision: to crack down on Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. PA security officials arrested hundreds of Hamas and Jihad members, confiscating weapons

and taking over mosques that had been run by the radicals. Hamas' *da'awa*, – i.e., its civil, educational, and economic infrastructure – had been dealt a heavy blow.

The results of these actions were marked: from 1998 to 2000 (until the renewed outbreak of violence in September 2000), there was a significant decline in numbers of attacks. Preventive actions by both Israel and the PA largely paralyzed the military activities of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, especially in the Gaza Strip.

The pace of attacks increased sharply with the outbreak of violence on September 29, 2000, reaching unprecedented dimensions in March of that year. The motivation for the renewed wave of attacks was the imbalance in Palestinian and Israeli casualties in the first months of the violence: Palestinian casualties far outnumbered Israeli ones. In an attempt to increase the cost of the conflict to Israel, terrorism within Israel proper was given increased emphasis. Not a week passed without at least one suicide attack; at times, two or three attacks would take place within a single week.

The attacks against the US on September 11, 2001, and the resulting international outrage stemming from them, brought about a temporary decline in suicide attacks in Israel. The PA's activity in this regard was central – the Authority declared a cease-fire against Israel, and managed to gain Hamas' cooperation. The context of this agreement was pressure from Arab governments on both the PA and

Hamas to refrain from suicide attacks at least within Israel proper. Even so, Hamas saw the agreement as a moratorium only, and activities were resumed at the end of October 2001.

The deadliest attacks of recent memory – such as the Park Hotel attack in Netanya (April 27, 2002, the first night of Passover) in which 29 were killed, and the attack on a Haifa restaurant (March 31, 2002), in which 15 were killed – were those carried out by Hamas. Hamas' success in this field derives from its care in selecting and preparing candidates for carrying out these attacks.

Some 149 suicide attacks have taken place since April 1993. Of these, 102 were carried out after the general outbreak of violence in September 2000, and were executed by one of five organizations: Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, Fatah, and the Popular Resistance (a coalition of Fatah, Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad). Some incidents of joint action among the various groups have also been recorded.

Recent Innovations: September 2000 and After

A number of developments following the outbreak of violence in September 2000 have been noted. These include the increased use of shooting attacks, which blur somewhat the line between suicide attacks and high-risk attacks that are not suicidal in the purest sense; the participation of the Fatah/Tanzim in suicide attacks; and the new phenomenon of women taking part in suicide attacks.

- *Shooting Attacks.* Mid-2001 saw

the appearance of a new tactic – that of the shooting attack. Shooting attacks have been carried out against Israelis both in settlements and in Israel proper, as well as against posts manned by Israeli security forces. Secular organizations, such as the Fatah/Tanzim, have taken the lead in these sorts of attacks. To date, 33 shooting attacks have been recorded, killing 60 Israelis and injuring 358.

The present violence has a growing religious dimension, despite the desire of the PA to set up a secular Palestinian state.

Shooting attacks appear to be planned as suicide actions. Moreover, those carrying them out seem to see themselves as would-be suicides, preparing last wills and testaments before their missions. As with suicide bombers, these wills were often (though not always) videotaped. Another indication of the 'suicidal' nature of these attacks may be seen in the fact that escape routes were not planned for or identified, since the chance of emerging alive from such an action was in any case judged to be extremely low. In Palestinian terminology, the shooting attacks are called *amaliyat istish'hadiya* – self-sacrifice actions – the same term that

is used to describe suicide actions generally. In Israeli nomenclature, these actions are termed "shooting attacks with a self-sacrificial nature," to distinguish them from actions in which attackers detonate explosives that they either carry or wear.

- *Tanzim among Suicides.* The recent violence has also brought members of the Palestinian security services into the ranks of the suicide attackers. This indicates a closer connection between PA officialdom and the radical Islamic movements.

Hamas' main infrastructure for organizing suicide attacks is in the northern West Bank, especially in the Nablus area, while the Islamic Jihad is concentrated in Jenin. The Jihad's Jenin-based infrastructure was responsible for all of that organization's suicide attacks, which were carried out in the Sharon region of Israel. While both of these organizations have branches in Gaza, their operatives have not succeeded in infiltrating into Israel proper; consequently, the majority of their attacks were carried out against soldiers and settlers within the Gaza Strip.

- *Women in Suicide Attacks.* The use of women in suicide attacks is another new phenomenon. To date, five women, all of them members of Fatah, have attempted or carried out such attacks. The first of these, Wafa Edris, was from the Ama'ari refugee camp near Ramallah. Edris blew herself up on January 27, 2001, in an attack on Jerusalem's Jaffa Road. On February 27, 2002, Darin Abu-Aisha blew herself up near the Maccabim

roadblock, injuring three Border Police. On March 29, 2002, Iyat Al-Akhras, 18 years old and from the Dahaishe refugee camp, blew herself up in an attack on a Jerusalem supermarket. Andalib Takatka, a resident of Bethlehem, blew herself up in the Mahane Yehuda Market in Jerusalem on April 12, 2002. Finally, Shifa Alqudsi, a would-be female suicide attacker from Tulkarm, was captured *en route* to carrying out her suicide mission.

The use of women in suicide attacks reflects a certain flexibility that has developed in recent years. In a conversation the author held with Sheikh Ahmad Yassin on March 6, 1995 in Ashmoret Penitentiary, Yassin noted that Islam did not involve women in suicide bombings. This ruling may have changed, in light of evolving needs and circumstances.

Arab-Israeli Involvement

The renewed violence also saw the first-ever suicide attack by an Arab-Israeli. The attacker, a resident of Abu-Snein named Shaker Hubayshi, blew himself up in an attack on a train station in the northern town of Nahariya. Three Israelis were killed and 30 wounded. Hubayshi was also unique for other reasons: 48 years old, he was the oldest-ever suicide bomber. He was also an established member of his community, married with children, and a former candidate for a regional council post. In every respect, Hubayshi defied the familiar profile for a potential suicide bomber.

Hubayshi's act fits into the context of a nationalistic radicalization taking

place among Arab-Israelis, resulting in greater support for Palestinian armed struggle in the West Bank and Gaza. This observation seems to be reinforced by the discovery of a group of three Arab-Israelis (Muhammad Mahamid, Abdullah Ma'alawani, and Ali Manasra) who had planned attacks together with Hamas activists in the West Bank. The three were all residents of the town of Umm el-

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Fahm, and supporters of radical Arab-Israeli Islamist leader Ra'ad Salah. They were recruited into Hamas in April 2001 by an activist named Ali Shawahana, while at Al-Najah University in Nablus. Together with their colleagues from the West Bank, a series of attacks were planned, including kidnapping soldiers and suicide attacks. On August 18, 2001, one of the three was arrested by the security services, only a single day before an attack planned against a bank in the town of Hadera was set to proceed.

The Causes and Motives for the Suicide Attacks

The sense of fulfilling a greater religious calling has been and continues to be the primary incentive for carrying out suicide attacks against Israelis and Jews. It should be borne in mind that this calling has both nationalistic-ideological and religious components; these have been intertwined since the establishment of the State of Israel and even before.

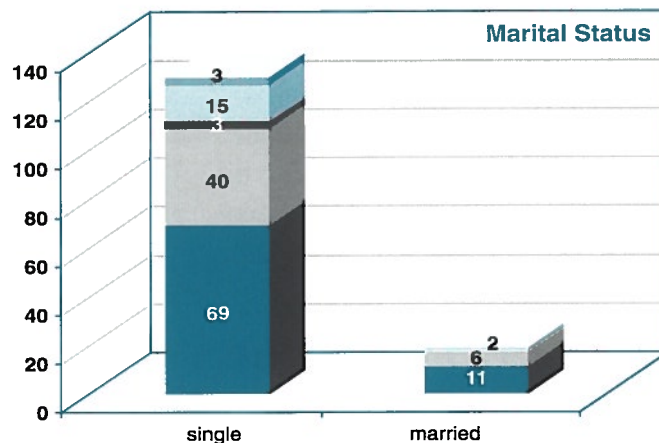
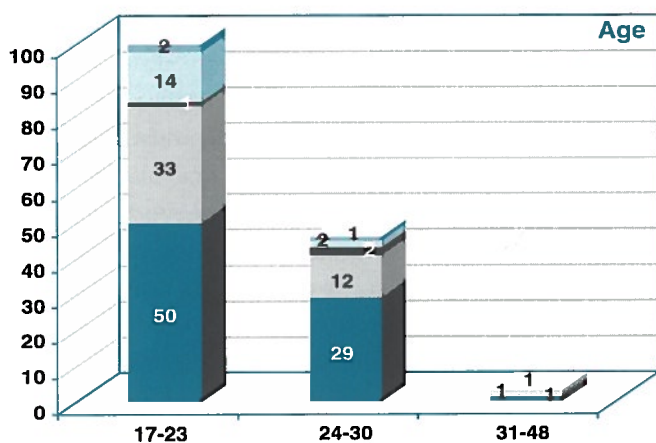
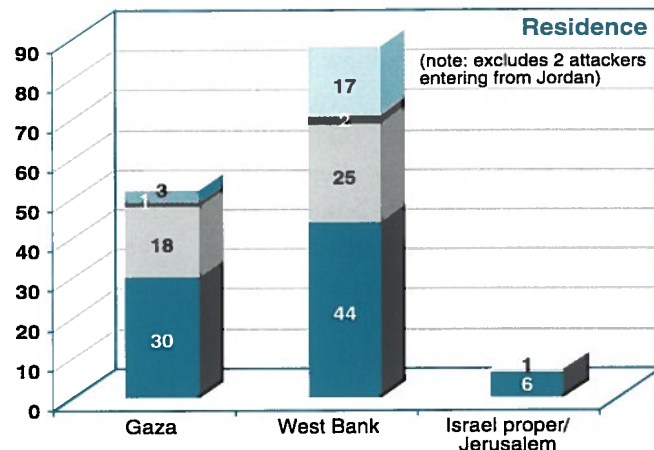
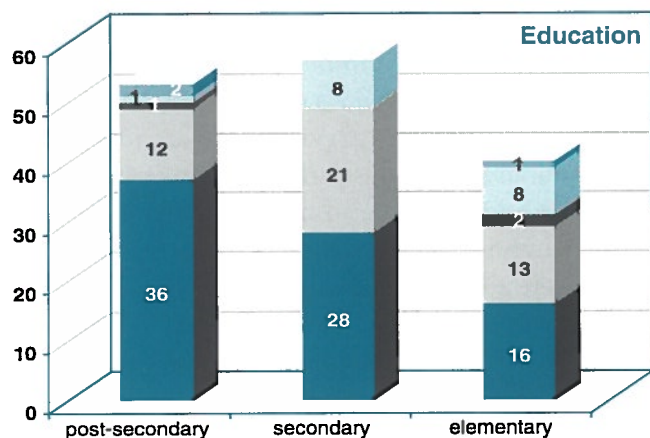
The present violence has seen a growing religious dimension, despite the desire of the PA to establish a secular Palestinian state. In this context, hatred of Jews has played an increased role: at demonstrations and funerals, both secular and religious Arabs can be observed shouting condemnations of Israel and Jews derived from historical Islamic themes.

Some of the suicide bombers were put through a process of religious indoctrination, through which it was stressed that their act of self-sacrifice was an act of supreme sacrifice in the name of *jihad*. Would-be attackers were told that they would soon be among the great heroes of Islam, in the company of Salah al-Din, Izz al-Din al-Qassam, and the Prophet Muhammad himself. As *shahids* – martyrs – their place in paradise would be assured, as would that of their family members.

The indoctrination of would-be attackers is carried out by charismatic clergy, but it would be an exaggeration to characterize this process as brainwashing. Rather, the would-be attacker is brought to an

Profiling the Suicide Bomber*

Looking at the Numbers



■ Hamas
 ■ Islamic Jihad
 ■ PFLP
 ■ Fatah
 ■ Popular Resistance

Organizational Affiliation of Suicide Attackers

(29.9.00–1.4.02)

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|-----------|
| Hamas | – | 44 |
| Islamic Jihad | – | 21 |
| PFLP | – | 3 |
| Fatah | – | 18 |
| Popular resistance | – | 3 |
| Jointly planned attacks | – | 6 |
| Total: | | 95 |

* Number of suicide attacks (Apr. 1993 – Apr. 2002): 149.

Profiling the Suicide Bomber

The Data in Context

Education

Attackers are disproportionately well educated, and this trend has increased since the outbreak of violence in September 2000. Fifty-three of the 149 attackers had at least some higher education (in particular, the attackers recruited by Hamas), while 56 had a high-school education and 40 had only an elementary education or none at all. This is due in part to the fact that many of the attackers were recruited by the "Islamic Bloc" at Al-Najah University in Nablus, or by activists at the Islamic University in Gaza.

Age

Most would-be attackers are young in age. Of the 149 attacks carried out since 1993, some two-thirds (100) were carried out by attackers who were 17-23 years of age. Of the remaining one-third, most were 24-30 years old. Only three were older, ranging from 31-48 years old. Hamas makes an effort to use 'older' attackers, assuming that their greater maturity (both in terms of operational perspective and ideology) will contribute to the success of the operation. By contrast, the Islamic Jihad has sent attackers as young as 16-17.

Marital Status

The vast majority of suicide bombers (130) were unmarried, a factor which has remained constant since 1993. It bears noting that some opposition exists among both the families of the attackers and the Palestinian public at large to the sending married people to their deaths.

Residence

The majority of suicide bombers (88) came from the West Bank, particularly from the northern West Bank. Most of the Islamic Jihad's attackers were from Jenin, testifying to its strong infrastructure there. Of the remainder, 52 were from the Gaza Strip, seven were from Jerusalem or from Israel's pre-1967 borders, and two were Palestinians from Jordan.

416 Israelis have been killed in the present violence. Of these, 151 were killed in suicide attacks, and another 1,400 were wounded.

ecstatic state. Prior to embarking on his mission, the would-be attacker is counseled to perform acts of purification, such as shaving off his beard and repaying debts.

However, it is significant that over the last year, indoctrination has become less common. The ongoing confrontation with Israel, with its attendant toll of casualties, severe economic decline, closures, curfews and roadblocks have all intensified despair and frustration – much of which is directed at Israel. This in turn has fuelled the desire to volunteer for and carry out suicide attacks, rendering indoctrination unnecessary. Another strong motive is revenge, whether for the deaths of friends, fellow cadres from the would-be attacker's organization, or relatives at the hands of Israeli forces.

Suicide attackers have become the stuff of legend in Palestinian society. Their photographs are displayed in public, and stories of their heroism are told in mosques and on the street. A strong desire has developed among some youths to follow the example of their predecessors and undertake attacks themselves.

Moreover, the attacks engender great admiration and support within Palestinian society, with recent polls showing support for them at nearly 90%. They are perceived as a legitimate tool, and garner popular respect for their sponsoring organizations. More-over, for the first time since its establishment, the PA is not taking any steps to foil or impede would-be attackers. Indeed, the opposite appears to be the case –

elements within the PA at times even encourage them. The attacks serve, in no small measure, as an outlet for the frustrations and tensions to which the Palestinians are subject in their daily lives.

For all of these reasons, it has become much easier to recruit would-be attackers over the past year, and this likely accounts for the dramatic increase in the number of attacks.

In all, the security services have been highly successful in foiling attacks.

What can be done?

How can Israel cope with the suicide threat? Is it possible to deter attackers whose hatred and determination is so great? These are the questions with which both American and Israeli security officials have increasingly had to grapple.

For any counter-terrorism campaign, intelligence information plays an essential role. Would-be suicide attackers do not operate in a vacuum. All of them belong to highly institutionalized terrorist organizations: traditionally either Hamas or the Islamic Jihad; of late, even secular groups like Fatah/Tanzim and the

PFLP, as noted above. These organizations supply an infrastructure that finds, recruits, trains, and arms would-be attackers, and then transports them to the sites where they are to carry out their missions. Efficient intelligence activity can be effective in tracking down activists involved in these efforts, and thereby foiling suicide attacks.

Israel's General Security Service, as well as the defense establishment as a whole, has succeeded in preventing the execution of scores of suicide attacks, especially during the current *intifada*. These successes have caught attacks in their very final phases, even when would-be attackers were already on their way to carrying out their missions. Efficient intelligence also makes it possible for Israel to undertake the targeted elimination of commanders, instructors, and the so-called "engineers" – those who build the bombs. Finally, intelligence information is essential for finding and destroying the laboratories in which explosive devices are prepared.

In all, the security services have been highly successful in foiling and preventing attacks, and there can be no doubt that many lives have been saved. This success is particularly impressive considering the difficulty involved in finding intelligence sources from within the ranks of the Islamic organizations. Even so, the number of deaths dwarfs the successes.

Additional actions which must be taken to foil future attacks must focus on tightening security along the

border between Israel proper and the West Bank. Security must also be improved at likely sites of attacks – places of leisure, educational facilities, public buses and trains, and even public squares and city markets. While no security measures can prevent *all* attacks, their potential for a positive contribution is clear.

In this context, it should be noted that terrorist organizations have largely failed in introducing suicide bombers into Israel from the Gaza Strip, in large part because of the fence which surrounds it (indeed, a number of would-be attackers have been stopped while trying to cross the fence). Clearly, there is an immediate need to establish a similar security barrier along the line separating Israel and the West Bank. Barriers akin to those erected in the valleys of the Gilboa Range and in the Sharon area would prove extremely helpful, and their construction is nothing short of imperative.

Conclusion

Suicide attacks, and their associated cost in casualties, fear, and anxiety for the public are an extremely difficult challenge to State of Israel. Nonetheless, it should be borne in mind that suicide attacks, like other forms of terrorism that have been carried out in the past, do not dramatically alter the balance of power between terrorist organizations and Israel. While painful and extremely difficult to bear, suicide attacks cannot be considered an *existential* threat to the state, just as it has not represented such a threat to any other state that has had to face them.

This is not to say that suicide terrorism does not have political ramifications for Israel. While not an existential threat, suicide attacks deeply influence Israel's political and decision-making processes, undermine the peace process, and harm both the economy and the quality of life for Israelis in general.

In that context, it is worth recalling

that such attacks are carried out from within a radical Islamic mindset, wherein the struggle between Islam and the Jews is eternal, and can only be concluded with the final victory of Islam over its enemies. It is essentially for this reason that not a single Islamic religious figure in the West Bank and Gaza has publicly denounced such attacks. Indeed, Hamas' leadership, including Sheikh Yassin, believes that suicide attacks will ultimately bring about Israel's destruction.

In the end, however, such attacks cannot bring about their stated goals, nor can they realize the collective aspirations of the Palestinian people – neither politically, nor militarily. Until a political solution is feasible, the best that can be done is to reduce the scope of the phenomenon by additional intelligence-gathering efforts, and through the establishment of a clear and efficient security buffer between Israel and the terrorists' centers of power.

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