Who are the Palestinian Suicide Terrorists?

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Suicide terrorism has become the Palestinians' primary mode of warfare in recent years. For Israel, this type of terrorism has become a strategic threat due to the heavy casualties it inflicts on the population and the effect it has on daily life in Israel.

Efforts to sketch one single psychological portrait of the Palestinian suicide terrorist have been unsuccessful, as have efforts to relegate the phenomenon of suicide terrorists to either clinical psychology (that is, to the personal, individual level) or social psychology alone. The disparity between the analyses of the professional literature and the actual phenomenon indicates the need for a more sophisticated conceptualization in order to understand this behavior, which causes so many and such different people to sacrifice their lives in order to injure "enemy" civilians. This essay proposes to examine the phenomenon of suicide terrorism through a number of prototypes, with the help of concepts from social psychology and clinical psychology. Examining the phenomenon from this multi-faceted angle may facilitate a better understanding of it, and enable a battle against the cognitive level that underlies suicide terrorism.[*]

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[*] This article is the summary of a study in progress, based on professional literature and information appearing in the media. The methodology used here will also be employed in a large-scale empirical study of suicide terrorists.

Background

On April 16, 1993, at a roadside café at Mehola Junction, Hamas operative Tamam Nabulsi drove a van into a parked bus and detonated it. Two passengers on the bus were killed and five were injured. This was the first suicide terrorist attack in Israel by a Palestinian terrorist group. Since then and until April 2003, Palestinians have attempted and carried out more than 250 suicide attacks: 135 of the suicide terrorists were Hamas members, 70 were members of Islamic Jihad, 39 were members of the Fatah movement, three were members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and three were members of the Forces of Palestinian Popular Resistance. 198 of the terrorists came from the West Bank, 54 were residents of the Gaza Strip, and seven lived in East Jerusalem or within the Green Line. One-third of the suicide terrorists were university students or graduates, approximately 40 had a high school education, and the remainder had a primary school education only – a distribution representing a considerably higher level than the average education of the Palestinian population as a whole. All of the suicide terrorists (including five women) were Muslim Arabs; there were no Christian Arabs among them.

Suicide terrorism commanded international attention after the September 11 attacks, which constituted a pivotal event in the early twenty-first century and marked a turning point in the history of terrorism. Professional literature offers dozens of definitions for the concept of terrorism. This study does not develop an original definition of the concept, and employs the following definition for suicide terrorism: an act of terrorism that makes intentional use of people who of their own free will give their lives to injure their opponent. Significantly, this definition would not include attacks that offer extremely low chances of survival for the attacker, for example some terrorist shootings,

> There are four prototypes of Palestinian suicide terrorists: the religious fanatic, the nationalist fanatic, the revenge seeker, and the exploited.

sometimes referred to as "no-escape attacks" or by Palestinian groups as "sacrificial" attacks. In other words, the definition refers only to attacks in which terrorists take their own lives through their own actions in a conscious manner that was planned ahead of time in order to strike at their adversary (civilians or security personnel that are not battlefield combatants).

Every suicide attack has three components: 1) a person with at least one motive and a willingness to carry out the attack 2) a system with a technical infrastructure to facilitate the planning and execution of the suicide attack 3) a decision to launch the attack by those who control the system. While this study focuses on the first component – the motivation and course of the suicide terrorist – it is clear that the phenomenon would not exist on such a large scale if it were not for the last two components.

So far, efforts to compile a profile of the suicide terrorist have failed, and it appears that the pool of suicide terrorists has many different characteristics. Professional literature offers various explanations for the phenomenon of suicide terrorism. These explanations can be classified into four main groups: psychological, religious, sociological, and political. The explanations found in the literature do not limit themselves to a specific group of suicide terrorists allied by one objective, but rather refer to the phenomenon as a whole.

Methodology

In contrast to previous research on the subject of suicide terrorism, this study proposes to examine the phenomenon using typology – a division into prototypes. Typology is a subjective matter, and its value is measured by the degree to which it facilitates an understanding of or an ability to address the phenomenon. The typological methodology here is based on the following premises:

■ Suicide terrorists can be classified by motivation or the population to which they belong.

■ We can identify prerequisites and factors that encourage each of the prototypes.

■ Even if a large proportion of

suicide terrorists have a number of motivating factors, each one has one motivating factor that is stronger than the others.

Based on a wide variety of material presented in the media, we constructed a typology of Palestinian suicide terrorists and identified four prototypes: the religious fanatic, the nationalist fanatic, the revenge seeker, and the exploited. This typology is based on the primary motivating factor of the suicide attack, and takes into account that each attacker has a unique "trajectory" that eventually led him or her to carry out the suicide attack.

Every prototype has prerequisites and supporting factors, as outlined in the table below. Prerequisites are conditions without which there is almost no chance that the prototype will emerge. Supporting factors contribute and accelerate the process, but are not mandatory. Supporting factors include: a social environment that is supportive of such an attack; media that disseminates the information among the supportive population; spiritual leadership that encourages such attacks; and financial and social assistance for families of suicide terrorists after their death.

The major difference between the various prototypes lies in the primary motivating factor and its relative importance in comparison to the supporting factors. According to our assessment, most of the supporting factors are present in all of the prototypes, but with differing relative importance. In our view, it is possible to identify dominant personality traits for every prototype. This study, however, will be limited to presenting hypotheses regarding these traits, and confirmation of these hypotheses will require additional research.

Four Prototypes of Suicide Terrorists

■ *The Religious Fanatic* – This prototype represents suicide terrorists whose primary motivating factor is

> According to a religious fanatic, "by pushing a button, you can immediately open the gate to heaven. It's the quickest way there."

religious, which warrants jihad, performing acts of personal sacrifice, and ascending to heaven. Those belonging to this prototype are usually characterized by a religious background and membership in an Islamic organization (such as Hamas or Islamic Jihad), and for the most part are young and unmarried. Until the beginning of the current intifada, most underwent religious education and operational training, but in the last few years the preparatory process has been considerably shortened. This prototype corresponds with the explanations of religious motivation presented in the research literature.

Most likely a large portion of the suicide terrorists belonging to this prototype were influenced by religious leaders delivering fiery speeches in mosques.

For example, S. was twenty-seven years old and one of ten children in a middle class family. He joined Hamas in his early teenage years and became a street operative. When asked how he felt when he was chosen for a suicide operation, he responded: "A tall, impenetrable wall separates you from heaven or hell. Allah promised one of the two to each of his creations. But this way, by pushing a button, you can immediately open the gate to heaven. It's the quickest way there." He described his preparations for the suicide attack as follows: "We were in a constant state of ritual. We told each other that if the Israelis knew how happy we were they would whip us to death. These were the happiest days of my life. The spiritual pulls us upwards, and the material pulls us downward. Someone who is going to become holy is immune to the pull of the material. We floated and swam in a feeling that we were going to enter eternity. We had no doubt. We swore an oath on the Koran, in the presence of Allah, that we would not hesitate. This promise of jihad is called 'beit al-riduan,' for the heaven that is reserved for prophets and the sanctified. I know that there are other means of jihad, but this way is sweet – the sweetest of all. Holy acts, if done in the name of Allah, hurt less than a mosquito bite."

■ *The Nationalist Fanatic* – This prototype represents suicide terrorists

A Typology of Suicide Terrorists who Act against Israel

Prototype	Prerequisites	Supporting Factors	Hypotheses as to the Prototype's Dominant Personality Traits
Religious Fanatic	Religious indoctrination encouraging and urging suicide attacks. Charismatic religious leaders with great influence on candidates for suicide operations.	A sympathetic public atmosphere within the religious community that praises martyrs, which includes publicity, great honor, and commemoration. A group that is characterized by intensive processes of collective thought. Community support of the family of the deceased suicide terrorist.	Faithful, steadfast, goal-focused, belief in divinely determined fate, influenced by people whom s/he reveres, belief in the world to come.
Nationalist Fanatic	Well-developed political consciousness, along with a sense of an uncompromising struggle to liberate Palestine. A clear feeling that the armed struggle and suicide attacks are an effective and necessary weapon in achieving political goals.	Participation of the organization to which the individual belongs in the suicide attack. A sympathetic public atmosphere that praises the sacrifice. Media that ensures wide coverage both in the Palestinian community and internationally.	Steadfast, sure in his/her ways, willing to sacrifice him/herself for the general public (idealist).
Avenger	Psychological injury based on one or more of the following events: • death or serious injury of a family member or another close individual • trauma related in some way to the Israeli occupation (personal humiliation, or witnessing the humiliation of a relative) • personal or family problems resulting in an individual's feeling that his or her life is worthless (culminating in or including depression)	A sympathetic public atmosphere that praises the martyrs, which includes publicity of names, great honor, and commemoration. Financial support for the family of the deceased suicide terrorist.	Hopeless, vengeful, tendency to see life as worthless.
Exploited	Suicide terrorists who are unable to refuse others, or unable to withstand the organizations' pressures to "volunteer" for a suicide operation, such as: • children and youth • adults in social distress (collaborators, homosexuals, moral offenders) • people with weak personalities.	A sympathetic public atmosphere that praises the martyrs. The suicide terrorists' belief that all their sins will become "white as snow" and that they will be granted full atonement for their past.	Dependent, anxious, difficulty withstanding pressure, recognition-seeking.

whose primary motivation is nationalistic and political. Those who belong to this group justify their actions first and foremost with reasons such as national liberation, the failure of the peace process, the Israeli occupation, and the struggle for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Most suicide terrorists of this prototype are members of secular organizations, primarily Fatah-Tanzim. This prototype, characterized by political motivation in ways similar to what is charted in professional literature, is represented by an idealist acting according to a motivation that is political and not personal. A wave of suicide terrorists of this prototype has flooded Israel since the beginning of 2002, following the assassination of Tanzim operative Raed Karmi. A large portion of the terrorists belonging to this prototype were most likely influenced by secular leaders and Palestinian incitement within the education system, as well as through Palestinian Authority media.

For example: Twenty-two year old Sa'id Khutari, a resident of Kalkilya whose family lives in Jordan, was the suicide terrorist who detonated himself at the entrance of the club at the Dolphinarium. Khutari's father told Abu Dhabi television that his son acted out of despair: "The Palestinian people believe in peace, but Israel left no option of continuing in this direction. Many of our young people have given up." The father added that he was ready to send all his sons on suicide attacks in Palestine: "I was very happy when I heard that it was my son who carried out the attack without belonging to any Islamic militia, as is usually the case."

■ *The Avenger* – This prototype represents suicide terrorists whose primary motivation is revenge, similar to the motivations given in the professional literature. These are cases of personal revenge for a family member or friend who has been killed, general revenge against Israel for its actions against the Palestinians,

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or revenge for the trauma caused by personal injury or the injury of a person close to them. It appears that a large percentage of those belonging to this prototype are influenced by Israel's actions against the Palestinian population, which incite them to retaliate.

For example: In May 2002, Jihad Titi, a young man in his twenties from the Balata refugee camp near Nablus, collected the shrapnel from a shell that killed his cousin, the Fatah commander in the camp, in an IDF operation. Titi inserted the shrapnel into a container of explosives that he carried with him, blew himself up, and killed a woman and her granddaughter.

■ *The Exploited* – This prototype includes people exploited by terrorist organizations and recruited in order to carry out suicide attacks. The exploitation can be based on the young age of the candidate (every juvenile suicide terrorist is of this prototype); the personal circumstances of a candidate that make it nearly impossible to refuse the proposal (for instance, a person accused of collaborating with Israel, or a woman accused of desecrating family honor); or someone who has difficulty standing up to pressure. This includes people who do not initially intend on becoming martyrs and who are not designated ahead of time by the terrorist organization as marked for an operation. Their recruitment has an incidental nature, and they are in effect "snared" by the operatives of the organization. In some cases, candidates expressed general support for suicide attacks without having any specific intentions, yet recruiters who hear such statements often use them in order to exert pressure for recruitment. In the professional literature, this prototype appears in the context of manipulation and exploitation of loyalty to a group, or the exploitation of problems in one's personal identity, but not necessarily in the context of exploiting children and adults simply because they cannot stand up to the pressure. It is likely that some of the suicide terrorists belonging to this prototype were exploited as a result of the legitimacy with which Palestinian

society regards this type of operation even though it uses the weak and the naïve, based on an approach of "the end justifies the means."

Example A: Hisham Ziyada, a police officer in the Palestinian Authority in Gaza, said that senior Hamas activists recruited his fifteen year old son Musa to carry out a suicide attack. Ziyada also said that he knows of five other youths who were charged with the task of carrying out suicide attacks. A letter asking the forgiveness of his parents and brothers was found among Musa's belongings. "He wrote that he would execute the attack in order to ensure himself a comfortable life in heaven." In the letter, his son explained that he had been recruited by two senior activists and that the attack was planned for February 14. A few weeks before this date, his father recounted, his son's behavior changed and one day he started talking about his desire for "a week long vacation from school in order to spend time with his uncle in the al-Berij refugee camp. This was a red warning light for me . . . We had been monitoring one of the mosques in al-Berij for quite a while. Hamas instructors lead discussions there with youth candidates for suicide attacks in Israel."

Example B: M. worked in agriculture in his village and also as a part-time volunteer for one of the security services of the Palestinian Authority. When asked what motivated him to carry out his attack, he responded: "Everyone says that there is a reason, but there isn't. I do not know what I was thinking. The

truth is that before that, I saw pictures of children who had been injured and killed on the television screen.... But to say that I had one reason or a few reasons ... no... . My cousin approached me one day and said to me, 'I want something from you.' I asked him what, and he told me, 'what do you think? About you carrying out a martyrdom operation.' I told him, 'if only I could.' I was sure he was

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kidding. But the next day we went into the city, sat down in a restaurant and ate humus and ful with some guy. Afterwards, I went with him and put on the explosives belt, and he told me that it would be on behalf of Fatah."

Conclusion

Suicide terrorism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained by means of clinical psychology or social psychology alone. The identification of different prototypes, as suggested in this study, indicates that both of these disciplines are necessary in order to isolate the characteristics of the various types.

The *social* approach dominates when sketching the main characteristics of the religious fanatic and nationalistic fanatic. These prototypes are influenced to a large degree by an environment that pushes people to undertake suicide operations for the sake of the collective, supported by wide popular support from both national and local forces, including: Palestinian public opinion, local and national religious leaders, the community in which the family lives, sympathetic media, financial support for the family of the suicide terrorist, and the Palestinian education system that preaches hatred of Israel. This comprehensive social environment may be referred to as the "culture of suicide terrorists" that has been created within Palestinian society. Palestinian suicide terrorists belonging to these two prototypes do not see themselves as hopeless and giving up on life, but rather as warriors sacrificing themselves for a goal. Thus, from their perspective they are ensuring themselves glory, recognition, and, according to some suicide terrorists, life in the world to come. The suicide terrorist demonstrates to his enemy that he has no intention of compromising on his goals and that nothing can deter him. Consequently, the relatively high level of education among terrorists is not surprising, as the educated population generally exhibits a large degree of social consciousness and a willingness to act towards fulfillment of the goals motivating all the prototypes.

The *personal* approach is most conspicuous in the exploited proto-

type, which is characterized by personality traits that make the individual more susceptible to recruitment for a suicide operation (for example, a weak personality that gives in to social pressure or personal problems). Finally, both the social approach and the personal approach can shed light on the revenge-seeking prototype.

This study intends to create a better understanding of the phenomenon that causes numerous diverse people to sacrifice their own lives for terrorist attacks against Israel. It may also be assumed that these prototypes – especially the religious fanatic and nationalist fanatic prototypes – are relevant to a characterization of suicide terrorists in other parts of the world.

This study can assist the fight against suicide terrorism by addressing the consciousness of those potentially involved. This would entail disseminating information to the entire population in the hope of reaching the target population - that is, potential suicide terrorists, people who may influence them, and those

> **The identification of these prototypes indicates that both social psychology and clinical psychology are important for identifying the different characteristics.**

who make it possible for them to carry out such an operation. The typology proposed here makes it possible to fine-tune the specific messages intended for each of the four prototypes and for the system that supports them, and to focus the efforts being made in the consciousness arena.

This typology is also useful for focusing on places where Palestinian suicide terrorism is bred, as well as on the factors influencing the various prototypes. These include: incitement in mosques (relevant primarily in the case of the religious fanatic), incitement in the education system and Palestinian propaganda (relevant primarily to the nationalistic fanatic), the Palestinian Authority's disregard for human rights (relevant primarily in the case of the exploited prototype), and Israel's injury to the Palestinian population (relevant primarily in the case of the revenge-seeking prototype). In other words, this typology may be of practical value, even if it does not necessarily help identify potential suicide terrorists within the overall population.