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# Do "suicide bombers" really commit suicide?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article applies a psychological approach to explore and to explain the behavior of Palestinian terrorists who blow themselves up in the light of their own words. It is shown that terrorists have no suicidal intent; hence their behavior is not an act of suicide. Psychological analysis point to a behavioral reaction to stress situations that are perceived as threatening to survival, which could account for the lethal activity of the Palestinian terrorists. These findings suggest that such terrorists could be deterred if an appropriate alternative for their lives was available to them.

## Introduction

The violent confrontations in Israel brought about by the Palestinians from 1992 to 2005 were epitomized by "suicide bombings" - the term given to terrorists who blow themselves up along with their intended victims<sup>3</sup>. This method was also employed

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<sup>3</sup> The author's definition of any act of political terror is the use, or threat of use, of violence by non-state individual actors or groups, acting in opposition to established authority in order to bring about desired political outcomes. (The definition draws partially on Wardlaw, 1982). This activity is not considered political-terror if it takes place as part of hostile activities between countries. The definition deliberately avoids a moral judgment and has no negative or pejorative connotations as regards the actors, because this would limit and even contradict the essence of any scientific research, especially involving social issues. Science by definition is a conceptual and technical framework for solving questions through an understanding of the factual data. A scientific definition does not deal with good and bad. It is only useful or not useful and these qualities are defined primarily in terms of how efficiently it can generate predictions concerning relevant events which turn out to be verified. (The scientist's personal stance on social issues is another issue entirely).

during the 1980s against the IDF in Lebanon, as well as against American soldiers in the Marine Headquarters in Beirut. Of course, the outstanding example of these terrorist attacks was the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. This method is employed today against American soldiers in Afghanistan and in Iraq.

This kind of terrorist attack primarily constitutes an operational problem for the armed forces and the intelligence services, and has also elicited academic interest. Without exception, researchers from different schools consider that this is a case of a suicide (To name only a few: Atran, 2003. Bloom, 2005. Kimhi & Even, 2004. Merari, 1990, 2006. Moghadam, 2003. Pape, 2003, 2005).

My point of view regarding this kind of terrorism is that of a psychologist who has dealt for many years with the subject of suicidal behavior (Oron, 2008, 2011, 2012). Based on knowledge gathered in the field of the psychology of suicide, this article analyzes verbal material produced by Palestinian terrorists. The aim is to inquire, first and foremost, whether these self-exploding Palestinian terrorists are suicidal, and in any case to pinpoint the typical circumstances in which the act is devised and carried out. The main findings are discussed below.

## The psychology of suicide

For readers who are not familiar with suicidal behavior, I will discuss in brief what does it mean to commit suicide.

A straightforward and conventional meaning is: when a person kills himself. Certainly, this is a necessary factor in defining suicide but not a sufficient one, because the overt act tells us nothing about what lies behind it. In other words, we have to probe the person's motivational sequence to determine whether the ultimate act was directed at annihilating himself. Only then will we be able, for instance, to differentiate a person who shoots himself because he intended to kill himself from another whose death was caused by a bullet discharged while cleaning his gun.

Several features of suicide have been defined in the field of suicidal behavior, the fundamental one of which is suicidal intent. Intent refers to the individual's desire to die and it is the most basic constituent of this behavior (Leenaars et al, 1997, Maris et al, 2000, Jacobs et al, 2006).

Another facet of intention is outcome. A person who wants to commit suicide understands the lethal outcome of his act. This kind of understanding is a vital cognitive condition that must be fulfilled before we can conclude that a person has put an end to his own life. However, the fact alone that a person knows that his act, or lack of action,

will lead to his death, does not necessarily tell us that he committed suicide. For example, consider the kamikaze pilots. An analysis of a sample of their farewell letters and diaries shows that none of them expressed a desire to die or planned to fulfill a death wish (Oron, 2003). These pilots did not volunteer to serve in the squadron in order to die but were chosen to do so in spite of themselves. Analysis shows that they simply complied with a military command<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the pilots yearned to go on living, and some of them visualized unfulfilled aspirations of a future in which they would get married and have offspring. Such pictures reflect a life image which is absent from the future-world picture of a person who is about to commit suicide.

Suicide materializes jointly the death wish, the death intent, and the mental ability to execute it. A suicidal act is executed by a person who is consciously motivated to abandon life and to desire his death, and to fulfill his wish he kills himself intentionally, or acts in a premeditative fashion to indirectly achieve his intention to carry out that wish. It is an act committed by the individual and to the individual directly (for example, shooting oneself), or through a partial/indirect act (such as waiting on the train tracks for a train which will cause death).

Moreover, suicides do not happen solely as the product of intolerable stressors or in a biographical vacuum. Suicidal decisions develop over a long period of time and are never completely explained by situational factors (Maris et al, 2000).

It is important to clarify that suicide should not be confused with voluntary death and the two different concepts should not be used interchangeably. From a psychological point of view, it is valid to conclude that suicide is a voluntary act, but not every act of voluntary self-killing is suicidal. True, various motives lead to voluntary death, among them sacrifice (see below: p. 4, *a. Total Threat*), but the one which is termed "suicide" is motivated in all situations and societies around the world by one, and only one, sequence of behavior, namely, a craving for death (Maris et al, 2000).

Hence, in order to know what motivates terrorists to kill themselves, a psychological research, which focuses individually on each terrorist's psychological makeup, is needed to be able to draw the appropriate conclusions.

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<sup>4</sup> From a psychological point of view, the pilots' obedience to the command derived from socialization in a kind of feudal social structure, and from the fact that Japan had a long standing policy of refusal to surrender (not to be explained here). This long-range policy was behind the idea of beating the enemy at the cost of certain death. During the war in China (1894) soldiers tied explosives to their bodies and threw themselves on enemy positions, and in the war of Japan against Russia (1904-5) there were soldiers who acted as "human bullets" (Sakurai, 1907/1999).

Clearly one should not underestimate such an inquiry; the intention to die or to live makes all the difference when considering psychological counter measures against self-exploding terrorists<sup>5</sup>.

## Do "suicide bombers" really commit suicide?

The motive of the Palestinian terrorists who blow themselves up was examined by analyzing what was said by ten terrorists whose assignment did not materialize, either because they were arrested before being able to set the bomb off or did not go through with it, or because of a technical fault in the explosion mechanism<sup>6</sup>.

The analysis of their own words points to an absence of suicidal intention since their behavior lacked the wish to die and the intention to execute this wish<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, most of these terrorists did not volunteer to carry out a terrorist mission but were selected by the commanders of the organization to which they belonged and complied with their commands.

Hence, the appropriate term to describe their behavior is not "suicide bombing" but a "self-exploding attack".

### ***Behavioral components of self-exploding attackers***

The analysis rules out suicidal intent, but rather shows a behavioral reaction to stress situations that the terrorists perceived as threatening to their survival. The combined components of this reaction are as follows.

- a. *Total Threat*; Analysis of the terrorists' statements suggests that they perceived the superior military power of Israel as a total threat to them.

What is the psychological meaning of this perception?

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<sup>5</sup> Several studies on the subject of terrorism base their line of research and reasoning on Durkheim's well known typology of suicide. However, Durkheim's typology was sociological in nature, and he defined his research goal as follows (Durkheim, 1897/1966, p. 151) : "We shall try to determine the productive causes of suicide directly *without concerning ourselves with the forms they can assume in particular individuals. Disregarding the individual as such, his motives and his ideas, we shall seek directly the states of the various social environments...in terms of which the variations of suicide occur*". [italics mine]. From a psychological point of view Durkheim's typology (and his definition of suicide, p. 44) necessarily leads to an inferential fallacy because it disregards the intention of the individual's observed act.

<sup>6</sup> The sample includes six men, one of whom was a fourteen year old, and four women. Three of the men were active in the mid- 90s and the remainder took part in the 2000 Intifada. Some of the participants were detained by the Palestinian Authority and others by Israel.

<sup>7</sup> The research method used was content-analysis which can be applied to written and oral material (Krippendorff, 2004. Neuendorf, 2002). In psychology this analysis refers to the visible (conscious) as well as to the invisible (unconscious) content (Gottschalk, 1969, 1995. Markel, 1998).

When a person feels that he is trapped in a situation in which he is on the verge of destruction, he must immediately find a suitable solution to reverse this state of affairs instantly. He needs to come up with an absolute, once-and-for-all, vital step to completely avert the impending catastrophe (Oron, 2002). The perception of the terrorists was that the Palestinians in the difficult circumstances in which they were at the time would be doomed without extreme combat on their part. In other words, the certain alternative to accomplishing the death assignment would be the annihilation of Palestinian society and with it their own annihilation. This prompted the terrorists to completely reverse the Palestinian role from victim to pursuer of Israelis wherever they might be.

Analysis shows that the imminent religious threat from Israel, in their opinion, was incidental to this existential threat but the combination of military and religious threat was heightened by the leaders of the terror organizations, and found its expression in the absolute formulations of their ideologies (Hatina, 1994). These leaders believe that the ideologies of their organizations stem directly from the Moslem religion, Islam, along with the imperative that all Muslims must participate in a Jihad to liberate Palestine by force. Thus, certain of self-explosive attacks might have been initiated solely as the outcome of the terrorists' theological perception that they, and the whole Palestinian society, were facing an imminent religious threat. For a true believer it is God's will to foil such a threat, and literally unthinkable not to carry it out at all costs.

One thinker belonging to the Muslim Brothers Movement in Egypt sees contemporary Jews as the descendants of the murderers of the Muslim prophets, and has suggested there is a murderous potential in each of the citizens of Israel. Hence, the struggle will come to an end only with the annihilation of the Jewish State (Mishal & Sela, 1999). In this life and death struggle, according to Hamas, every Jew in Israel is an occupier and an invader against whom a total war for survival must be waged in order to uproot the "Zionist cancer" (Kurz, 1993. Mishal & Sela, 1999).

Reference to cancer as a disease implies death and everyone who wants to live must eliminate it. This constitutes a total, lethal solution to a total life threat. The use of this dehumanizing image by the Palestinian terrorists stresses their sense of total threat and the resulting need for a totalistic program which provides a once-and-for-all solution. Hence it is clear why terrorist organizations have no political solution since the very existence of Israel constitutes a total threat to every Muslim.

Note that even though terrorists were ready to sacrifice themselves, sacrifice is still not synonymous with suicide. Sacrifice is committed by a person who has no alternative and out of a desperate attempt to protect his own or another's life, whereas suicide derives from the suicidal wishes to die and to end one's life. Furthermore, the alternative to suicide is the continuation of life, whereas a sacrifice made when death is looming occurs in circumstances in which the alternative spells destruction in any case (at times in objective circumstances, but at times only subjectively as in a baseless assessment of the enemy's intentions). In other words, the degree of sacrifice increases with the degree of the expected loss without it, and therefore, so long as the likelihood of loss of life is on the rise, as in war, the risk involved in a life-saving sacrifice rises as well.

*b. The Experience of Personal Threat;* When the threat is coupled with a personal experience of utmost danger, the motivation to attack increases. Analysis of the terrorists' statements shows that a perception of religious threat gained strength after Ariel Sharon entered the Temple Mount in September 2000, which was interpreted as his intention to take over a holy site of Islam. However, the bulk of the threat derives from the daily risks experienced by the terrorists in the West Bank and Gaza, which are interpreted as an impending threat on the part of Israel. In other words, even when the religious and national sources of hostility feed the motivation of the terrorist to attack, these sources still must be combined with an individual experience which is interpreted by the terrorist as a threat to himself or to his family and friends. For instance, a terrorist who tried to detonate an explosive belt at one of the intersections in the north of the country (that only resulted in his own injury) considered carrying out such an attack only after the occupation of the Jenin refugee camp, his place of residence. When two others described the IDF's entry into the refugee camp in Jenin which motivated them to go out on a self-explosion terror attack, they implied that their death could take place in any case, either randomly during crossfire or as a deliberate policy of the army to wreak its wrath on the refugee camp.

*c. Semi-Military Training;* The core feature of training is to obey orders. The terrorist obeys his commanders to fulfill his duty the way he has done many times before, however risky the assignment, and his compliance with the order to perform his last mission also derives from the semi-military training he received.

The role of training programs is to develop skills to reduce the destructive effects of fear reaction in combat (Holmes, 1986). Therefore, trainees are taught how to perform defined acts that will be adaptive in the face of a specific threat. In this way the terrorists' minds are brimming with self-confidence in their own strength, and as a result their anxiety subsides when they skillfully perform these operational programs. Further, this activity distracts their attention from the threat since they are focusing on the assignment.

The lion's share of the terrorists who operated against Israel had already acquired military skills and experience in the terrorist organization that sent them on their lethal missions. For example, one terrorist was a member of the Hamas movement and took part in several terrorist attacks, including the murder of a soldier which he admitted to when captured. His previous military training for earlier terrorist attacks and the risk he experienced while carrying them out equipped him with both fear-alleviating skills and the ability to focus on the planned sequence of operational events leading up to the goal.

*d. Mental Defense;* Even when the terrorists draw on sources of religious resentment against Israel from their culture and share the perception of total threat reinforced by personal experience (physically as well as religiously or by identification with a victim), they still need to undergo a process of mental disengagement; in psychological terms – dissociation (Cameron, 1969. Hilgard, 1977. Spiegel, 1986). This is a process of mental defense, enabling a person to ignore to some extent especially difficult aspects of his environment and continue to function without being totally overwhelmed by anxiety. This is the case when we see a road accident – we close our eyes or look elsewhere. Some passers-by did just this during the collapse of the Twin Towers.

For example, consider the videos made of the "Sha'hid" (martyr) before he sets out on his last route. The terrorist appears with a green headband inscribed with verses from the Koran, holding a gun in one hand and the Koran in the other. His appearance is devoid of self identity and reflects his estrangement from his death as a personal death, because here, the person who is about to set out to perform the terror attack is simply the representative of an ideology and not himself as an individual. The background of the picture - the Al-Aksa mosque and the map of Palestine from the Jordan river up to the Mediterranean, enhances the process of dissociation by a sense of symbolic immortality which dims the fact of his demise, because of his role as a contributor to the continued existence of Palestinian society and its religion.

Sometimes the dissociation process begins earlier, for example, when the recruited terrorists undergo training to decrease their fear by staying in a cemetery at night. In these drills they symbolically strip away their life and accept their lethal role as devoid of personal existence. In this way, death in the terror attack will come to an anonymous representative of the organization. A “victory dance” over death performed by terrorists wearing shrouds and already considered dead, adds to this process.

*e. Culture and Socialization;* The terrorist organizations’ refusal to accept a political solution stems from the socio-political development of the Palestinian Arabs. At its inception is their geographical isolation and their perception of the Zionist waves of immigration from 1904 onward as a foreign body, gradually invading a monolithic Muslim space. In addition, contrary to religious Jews who only made pilgrimages to the Holy Land in previous generations, the new immigrants had a clearly defined national goal. Furthermore, the Zionist immigrants created a stir from the start because of their non-religious (virtually atheist) way of life which was so foreign to the one that had existed for centuries, and which, according to the local perception, threatened to undermine the foundations of social-religious existence. The current Palestinian perception of their total annihilation by Israel has its roots in this ancient socio-existential apprehension which grew with the increase of immigration and land purchase, along with the accompanying various armed conflicts (Porath, 1971, 1978).

Their existential anxiety did not decrease in the aftermath of the War of Independence (1948) or the Six-Day War (1967), because the occupation of Arab territories fueled their perception of the Israeli wish to spread outward in the Middle East. After the Six-Day War the Palestinian fear that the status of the Islam in the area would be undermined augmented as a result of the occupation of Temple Mount and the increasing influence of religious, even fundamentalist, elements in Israel (Shaby & Shaked, 1994). Thus, prolonged objections and enmity have found their way into the ideologies of the various terrorist organizations, along with the total military-operational actions decreed by their commanders who believe that Israel and its army have lethal intentions against the Palestinians.

The overall analysis of the material concerning the self-exploding terrorists shows that they are not a monolithic group, but rather can be divided into five sub-groups. The first

is made up of those who are members of a terror organization, and the second is composed of those who have volunteered to blow themselves up with no previous connection to some organization and did so because they were enraged over a single incident they experienced. The motivation of the first sub-group is deeper and more laden with the ideology of totalism than the second. The third sub-group includes terrorists who comply with the organizations' representatives and are intuitively chosen by the recruiters according to their personality traits, which make them more susceptible to a type of coercive persuasion (including children, borderline personalities, and character disorders). The fourth sub-group is composed of female terrorists. They differ by their absence of previous membership in an organization, but their specific characteristics requires further research.

The fifth sub-group consists of men and women who changed their minds and did not carry out the planned attack. These terrorists may shed light on the psychology of self-exploding terrorists and on the possibilities of foiling such attacks.

Analysis indicates that these were mainly the volunteers who were not previously members of any terror organization (but nevertheless had to obey the orders of the commanders of the group and to follow their instructions). Take, for example, a woman terrorist who, in revenge for the shooting of her boy friend by the IDF, volunteered to set out with a sixteen year old boy to carry out a terror attack in a town in the center of the country. As planned, the boy was supposed to blow himself up in the middle of a game club, whereas she was told to wait on the street opposite for panic-stricken people to run in her direction and blow herself up among them. The analysis of her own description of the event shows that her ability to focus on the planned sequence of operational steps leading up to the goal was disrupted when she looked at the passersby and suddenly saw real human beings and not an abstract and amorphous Zionist enemy. Her animosity toward an enemy that had been an anonymous mass gradually melted away. No less significant is the fact that she saw her terrorist friend exploding in front of her eyes. The sight materialized the actual outcome of the sequence of events she was about to bring on herself and also on the people around her. In addition, because she was not a member of a terror group and had not participated in military training and fighting, her mind was not prepared properly for the attack. The key feature, however, is that this female terrorist perceived herself as an autonomic individual and not as an anonymous messenger of a terror organization. Therefore, she was protected from being swept away by her hatred of Israel and the ideology of totalism.

## Concluding Remarks

This study was conducted to help grasp the motives of self-exploding terrorists, revealing aspects of the phenomenon that have not been sufficiently studied. It also calls for the replication of the research in Israel as well as under different unique conditions and samples around the world.

The pivotal factor that accounts for the fundamentals behind the Palestinian terrorists is the perception of the military threat of Israel as total, and the total solution resulting from it, associated with a total-religious perception. The analysis here shows that the religious perception is secondary to the sense of danger deriving from the immediate military threat to physical existence, although it exacerbates it to the extreme.

Thus, the self-exploding terrorists do not wish to die, and they act out of a perception that they have no alternative alive. This dual finding points to the fact that presenting such a living alternative (including a political one) could prevent them from carrying out their deeds, and emphasizes the importance of psychological research which does not rely solely on overt behavior but rather concentrates on each individual as a case-study to determine his/her innermost motives and mode of perception.

In proposing an alternative that can lead to the prevention of self-exploding attacks, it should be borne in mind that this cluster of terrorists (and presumably the entire population of terrorists) falls into sub-groups according to their motives, including those who abandon their mission.

Applying ideas for foiling terror attacks around the world in real life is complex, but a pre-requisite is to conduct psychological research on those terrorists.

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