



Al-Aqsa Terrorism: The Role of Religious Motivation in Popular Terrorism

(Article by Nadav Shragai based on his new book: Al-Aqsa Terror – From Libel to Blood, published by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs in collaboration with Sella Meir Publishing House)

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Highlights

- ▶ The Al-Aqsa in danger libel is deeply rooted in the days of the Grand Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini and dates back to the 1920s and 1930s. **This libel has been intensified in recent decades and has been a highly effective religious trigger for motivating Popular Terrorism, and more often than not also for motivating organized terrorist attacks.** The libel arouses strong feelings among the Muslim general public, both religious and nationalist, and it also creates a sense of unity among the Arabs of Israel and those of Judea, Samaria and East Jerusalem.
- ▶ Hundreds of terrorist attacks or attempted attacks, carried out throughout Israel in recent years as part of the Popular Terrorism, **were carried out by terrorists who were inspired by this false libel and believed that Israel was working to destroy the mosques on the Temple Mount.** Over the years, the libel ceased to be mere incitement and false propaganda and became a **terrorist production line.** Some of the Al-Aqsa shaheeds had severe personal problems or were mentally disturbed. **They chose to channel their personal problems to religion and nationalism, and to the path of terrorism, in order to gain rehabilitation and purification in Palestinian society.**



Posters depicting the Israeli threat to the Al-Aqsa Mosque (right: Khalaji.mohammadali's Instagram account; Left: Hajjaj_cartoons' Instagram account. From Nadav Shragai's book, page 125)

- ▶ The connection and interaction between shahada (i.e., self-sacrifice for the sake of Islam) and the strong and almost blind belief that Al-Aqsa was in danger **led to Al-Aqsa terrorism**

in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century. This was **Popular Terrorism**, carried out mainly by individuals **and not directed by any specific organization.** It was inspired by the alleged threat to Al-Aqsa and from shahada, and its perpetrators were Al-Aqsa shaheeds. For example, 67 of the 71 terrorist attacks carried out in Jerusalem between August 2014 and May 2016 were related in one way or another to the so-called crimes of the Jews on the Temple Mount and Al-Aqsa. These were mentioned as the only reason, or as one of the reasons, that motivated the perpetrator to carry out an attack.

► A study conducted by Prof. Ariel Merari and Prof. Boaz Ganor for the Israeli Ministry of Internal Security indicates that the terrorist attacks were based on a combination of motivations: psychological circumstances, ideological motives and personal circumstances. **Two-thirds of all the perpetrators included in the sample of personal interviews carried out by Prof. Merari and Prof. Ganor suffered from a mental disorder, psychosis or suicidal tendency. A total of 54% of the respondents even noted that they would have preferred to die in the attack.** The obvious question is this: **Was it the terrorists' personal problems, and sometimes also their suicidal tendencies, that led them to carry out the attack on their own volition? Or was it Palestinian society that urged them and urges people in distress to become shaheeds in order to "save the Al-Aqsa Mosque" or to promote nationalist Palestinian ideas?**

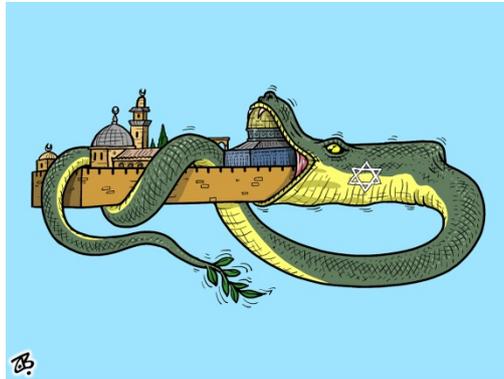
► The answer to these questions is fairly clear: in a significant number of cases, reality shows that the Al-Aqsa shaheeds initially suffered from another significant personal problem that was not religious or nationalist. **Palestinian society, which is not an open society, has not been able to contain their problems, nor has it provided them with professional tools to enable them to cope with them.** Many of them therefore preferred to **channel their severe personal problems to religion and nationalism, and to the path of terrorism**, drawing inspiration from the dual Palestinian ethos of Al-Aqsa in danger and shahada.

Introduction

The connection between the Al-Aqsa in danger libel and shahada as a source of inspiration for Popular Terrorism

► The Al-Aqsa in danger libel claims that the State of Israel is working to demolish the mosques on the Temple Mount and build the Third Temple in their place. The lie dates back to the days of the Grand Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini in the 1920s and 1930s, but it has been

greatly intensified in the past few decades and has become accepted and widespread in Muslim, Arab and Palestinian discourse.¹The many terrorist attacks that have been part of our lives here for several years are based on and inspired by the **Al-Aqsa in danger libel**. That being the case, it is appropriate to call them: **Al-Aqsa terror**.²

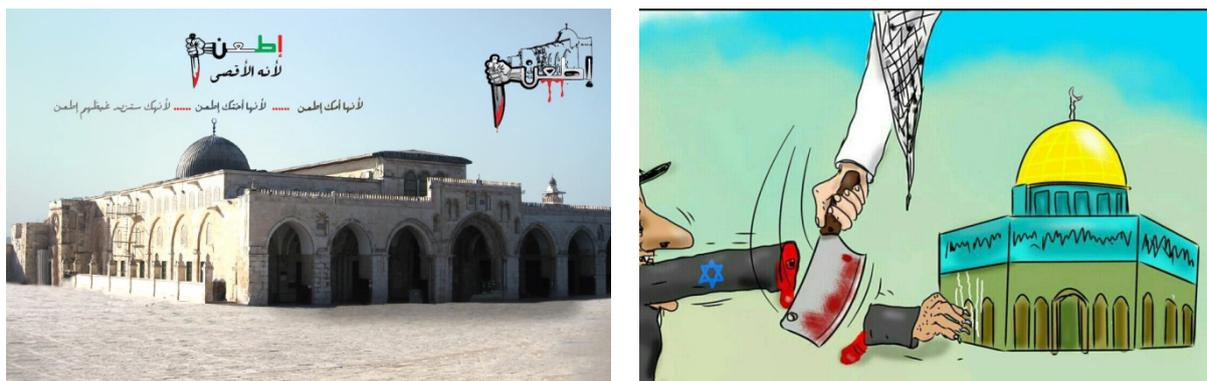


Poster depicting the Al-Aqsa in danger libel
(Hajaj_cartoons' Instagram account, from Nadav Shragai's book, page 125)

- ▶ Between 2014 and 2017, hundreds of Palestinian terrorists took to the streets of Jewish cities and towns throughout Israel, as part of activity referred to by the Palestinians as Popular Terrorism. They stabbed, ran over and sometimes also shot for one purpose: to harm, wound and murder as many Jews as possible, all in the name of Al-Aqsa. Many of the terrorists were killed in the attacks that they perpetrated, and Palestinian society almost immediately dubbed them shaheeds.
- ▶ The Al-Aqsa shaheeds saw themselves as part of a struggle to save the mosque. They and their handlers described the Al-Aqsa Mosque – which had been “taken over by Israel” – as captive, desecrated, unclean and threatened. To their understanding, Al-Aqsa – as sacred Muslim territory – is in terrible danger. Many of them believed in the countless versions of the libel, whereby the State of Israel is plotting to topple the mosques on the Temple Mount. Many others were incited to believe the additional tier built in recent years on top of the basic libel, whereby Israel is plotting to change the status quo on the Temple Mount, and allow Jews to pray there. Facts or logic played virtually no role in the world of these shaheeds, just as they played no role in the world of their handlers. They were overshadowed by religious beliefs and emotions.

¹ For more information, see Nadav Shragai, *The Al-Aqsa in Danger Libel, A Profile of a Lie*, Ma'ariv Book Guild and the Jerusalem Center for Public and State Affairs, 2012.

² For more information, see Nadav Shragai, *Al-Aqsa Terror. From Libel to Blood*. The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and Sella Meir Publishing House, 2020.



Posters calling on Palestinians to chop off the Israeli hand that covets the Al-Aqsa Mosque and to carry out stabbing attacks (Right: Syrilution's Facebook page, page 43 in Nadav Shragai's book; Left: Moh.bassam.3's Facebook page, page 40 in Nadav Shragai's book)

- ▶ Even before the Al-Aqsa in danger libel developed in its current form, the Palestinians gave a new meaning to the Islamic religious term, *shahada*. They awarded this title to anyone who was killed while murdering or attempting to murder Jews. *Shaheed* (plural: *shuhada*) is originally a religious-Muslim term which literally means witness. This is a title given to a Muslim after his death, if he was killed during a war for the sake of religion or while fulfilling a religious commandment.³ *Shahada* is a kind of martyrdom, and in today's parlance – a *shaheed* is anyone who fell in the war against non-Muslims, whether or not he was killed as a fighter, as long as he died at the hands of the enemies of Islam. Those who carry out *jihad* – a proactive war against the enemies of Islam – and sacrifice their souls (*istishhad*) are considered to be endowed with special virtues.⁴
- ▶ As long ago as 1999, many years before the Al-Aqsa in danger wave of terrorism, Sheikh Abd al-Salam Shkeidem, Chief Mufti of the PA Police, enumerated the rewards the *shaheed* earns according to Islamic tradition: “From the moment his first drop of blood spills, he feels no pain and he is absolved of all his sins; he sees his seat in heaven; he is spared the tortures of the grave; he is spared the horrors of the Day of Judgment; he is married to 70 black-eyed [beautiful women]; he can vouch for 70 of his family members to enter paradise [...]”⁵
- ▶ Two years later, the Mufti of the PA, Sheikh Ikrima Sabri, spoke in a similar vein about *shaheeds* in a Friday sermon at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The remarks were made in light of the

³To be precise, the word *shahada* has three meanings in Arabic: (a) testimony, bearing witness; (B) the Muslim declaration of faith; (C) sacrificing oneself for Islam; this is the declaration of the highest degree of faith and is called *al-shahada al-kubra*, i.e., the great *shahada* (from: Menachem Milson, *Jihad Today*, published as an abstract of an article in the library of the Center for Educational Technology, on the MEMRI website).

⁴Menachem Milson, *Jihad Today*, *ibid*.

⁵*Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* (PA), September 17, 1999, in: The Joy of the Mothers of Palestinian ‘Martyrs,’ December 4, 2001, MEMRI website.

wave of suicide bombing attacks in the Al-Aqsa Intifada (the Second Intifada). Sabri clarified that “the Muslim loves death and shahada, just as the Jews love life” and that “the Muslim who loves death (and seeks) shahada is not afraid of oppression [...] or of the weapons of those who shed blood [...]”.⁶

► Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the most important Muslim jurists of our generation and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, who served until 2018 as president of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), made it clear as early as the 1980s that although Islam does not consider suicide a legitimate act, anyone killed in a suicide bombing attack against Israel is considered a shaheed. “Israel is something else,” Al-Qaradawi ruled, “the attacks against it are permitted [...] An opponent is allowed to turn into a live bomb and blow himself up among his enemies.”⁷ Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, the Grand Imam of the Al-Azhar Mosque and the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, who died in 2010, also ruled (in 1996) that “anyone who explodes among enemies in order to defend his land is considered a shaheed.”

► During the Second Intifada, Yasser Arafat also contributed his own stamp of legitimacy to shahada through a catchy message that he coined: “To Jerusalem we march – shaheeds by the millions.”⁸

► Palestinians on the ground associated his words with Al-Aqsa. In demonstrations throughout Judea and Samaria, the masses often shouted: “To Al-Aqsa we march – shaheeds by the millions.” In the early 2000s, hundreds of Israeli Arabs visited the office of Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat in Ramallah, and with him they also chanted the promise: “We will open the door of Al-Aqsa with the blood of the shaheeds.”⁹

► The connection and interaction between shahada, as the Palestinians understood and assimilated it, and the strong and almost blind belief that Al-Aqsa was in danger led to Al-Aqsa terrorism in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century. This was Popular Terrorism, carried out mainly by individuals (also known as lone wolves) and not directed by any specific organization. It was inspired by the issue of Al-Aqsa and shahada, and its perpetrators were Al-Aqsa shaheeds.

⁶Voice of Palestine Radio (PA), May 25, 2001, in: *The Joy of the Mothers of Palestinian ‘Martyrs,’* *ibid.*

⁷Cited by Dr. Sari Goldstein Ferber in her article: ‘Psychological Warfare in the Territories and the Profile of the Suicide Bomber,’ *Maarachot Publications* 389.

⁸Arafat: “To Jerusalem we march – shaheeds by the millions,” *Ynet website*, March 29, 2002.

⁹Ali Waked and Smadar Shmueli, ‘Tibi Supporters in Meeting with Arafat: To Jerusalem we march – shaheeds by the millions,’ *Ynet website*, February 9, 2002.

- ▶ There were those in the defense establishment (and in the media) who did tend to describe these events somewhat casually as lone wolf terrorism or, to coin an oxymoron – the lone wolf intifada. However, these lone wolves gathered en masse around a common idea and made themselves part of a distinctly collective interest, adhered to by masses of Muslims: the false Al-Aqsa in danger blood libel.
- ▶ Many of the lone wolf attacks that were part of the Popular Terrorism (not directed by any specific organization) drew on this libel, which, as stated, accused the State of Israel of plotting to destroy the Temple Mount mosques. In my book: *The Al-Aqsa in Danger Libel, A Profile of a Lie*¹⁰, published in 2012, I expanded on the libel. The book on which this article is based hardly addresses it or its manifestations. It mainly documents and analyzes its consequences and the terrorism engendered by the libel: Al-Aqsa in danger terrorism and its perpetrators: the Al-Aqsa shaheeds, as a central part of the Popular Terrorism.
- ▶ The foundations for the proliferation of terrorist incidents against this backdrop were laid as early as the beginning of the 20th century, in the days of the Grand Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini, during the Western Wall dispute and the 1929 Arab riots in Palestine. These were already a direct result of Al-Aqsa in danger incitement. The Mufti then accused the Jews of not being content with praying at the Western Wall. As is well known, he claimed that they had set their sights on the Temple Mount and the destruction of Al-Aqsa. Sixty years later, the October 1990 incidents on the Temple Mount and the severe bloody confrontation between police and demonstrators there, added another layer of consciousness to Al-Aqsa terrorism. A third layer of consciousness was laid in September 1996, at the time of the Western Wall Tunnel Riots, and the Al-Aqsa in danger libel was disseminated once again. At the time, Israel created an exit from the Hasmonean and Western Wall tunnels to the Via Dolorosa in the Christian quarter of the Old City, to serve as a passageway for tourists. The PA accused Israel of knowingly and deliberately endangering the Al-Aqsa Mosque¹¹, and Yasser Arafat ordered Palestinians to respond. Fighting and severe violence broke out in Judea and Samaria, lasting three days. In 1929, a total of 133 Jews were murdered and 339 were wounded. In 1990, a total of 17 Palestinians were killed and dozens of worshipers at the

¹⁰Nadav Shragai, *The Al-Aqsa in Danger Libel, the Portrait of a Lie*, Maariv Publishing House and the Jerusalem Center for Public and State Affairs, 2012.

¹¹ The accusation was unfounded, since the opening was made to the west of the Western Wall line, in the direction of the Via Dolorosa, into a tunnel that already existed and was not excavated at all, but rather re-exposed (the Hasmonean Tunnel). The excavation did not extend below the Temple Mount compound.

Western Wall were wounded, and in the events of 1996, a total of 17 IDF soldiers and about 100 Palestinians were killed.

► At the ideological level, the terrorist incidents in the second decade of the 21st century drew on these three incidents, along with the first two intifadas which, according to the Palestinians, broke out in view of the Jews' intention to destroy Al-Aqsa.¹² This time, too, the incidents were frequent, systematic, and ideologically structured. The waves of terror that broke out in 2014 and 2015 began with a long series of terrorist attacks which were directly inspired by the Al-Aqsa in danger libel. They developed in July 2017 – with the attack on the Temple Mount carried out by three members of the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel led by Ra'ed Salah – into attempts by Muslims to attack and damage a place sacred to the Muslims themselves, in the courtyards of the mosques; on the Temple Mount itself, on the pretext that visits there by Jews should be prevented or disrupted to the maximum extent possible.

The libel as an integral part of the Palestinian narrative

► Thus, the Al-Aqsa in danger libel became an effective and central tool in the arsenal of tools used by the Palestinians to agitate the Palestinian public and provoke violence and terrorism around the Temple Mount. However, even before that, the libel formed an integral part of the overall narrative that the Palestinians developed over the past 100 years against Zionism, the Jews, and the State of Israel.

► Brig. Gen. (ret.) Yossi Kuperwasser, who headed the research division of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate during the Second Intifada, found that this narrative comprised four historical insights, from which three precepts were derived. This study (Al-Aqsa Terror) suggested that the Al-Aqsa in danger libel and Al-Aqsa terrorism should also be included in these insights, since they have become an integral part of the narrative and its components. More than once they maintained it. Many times they even spearheaded it.¹³

¹²Shaul Bartal, 'The Way of Jihad in Palestine,' *Carmel*, 2012, p. 250. Bartal notes that the Hamas curriculum describes the excavations on and around the Temple Mount as the main cause of the outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987. The Second Intifada, which began after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount on September 28, 2000, was also fueled by the same allegation, which was made by Sheikh Hassan Idrissi, among others. Idrissi claimed that Sharon, "the defiler of the mosques," came to the Temple Mount as part of the plan to demolish the site and build the Jewish Temple in its place. See Bartal, *ibid*, Note 32.

¹³Based on a conversation with Yossi Kuperwasser in July 2019, about his article, 'Abbas revealed the face of the PA,' on the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs website, January 1, 2018, and on the

- ◆ The Jews are not a people or a nation, but only a religion, and therefore they are not entitled to self-determination. In light of this, the Palestinian leadership makes widespread use of the term: two-state solution, taking care not to use a term that is similar but completely different: two states for two peoples, since the Jews are not a people.
 - ◆ There is no national Jewish history in the Land of Israel or in Palestine, and therefore all of Palestine belongs exclusively to the Palestinian people, while the claim for the existence of a Jewish nation-state in the Land of Israel is baseless. For this reason, the Palestinians deny the existence of the Temple as well as the history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. For this reason, they are also not willing to engage in any partnership with the Jews and the State of Israel in Al-Aqsa (the Temple Mount), they cultivate the Al-Aqsa in danger libel, and even support the multiple terrorist attacks that are derived from and affected by it.
 - ◆ The Palestinians have adopted many of the stereotypes characteristic of anti-Semitism in Europe, and have attached them to Zionists and settlers – greedy, racist, cruel and more. They have reinforced the classic anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews by adding hostile motifs to Jews, taken from Muslim traditions, such as the claim that Jews are descendants of monkeys and pigs, or the claim that Jews defile Al-Aqsa.
 - ◆ The Jews came to Palestine because the Europeans wanted to get rid of them, and therefore they forced them on the Palestinians. Since Israel is considered the bridgehead of the West and its corrupt culture in the heart of the Muslim East, the struggle against its existence is part of the defense of Islam, especially Al-Aqsa.
- From these, as stated, three precepts are derived:
- ◆ Even if this is not feasible in the foreseeable future, the Palestinians must be completely loyal to the aspiration to control all of Palestine, with Al-Quds and Al-Aqsa at its heart. Anyone who deviates from this is considered a traitor.
 - ◆ The Palestinians have been and will always be the only victims of the conflict. Not the Jews.
 - ◆ The resistance to Zionism (*muqawama*) must be constant, and the dates of its implementation are determined according to cost-benefit calculations, at any given

author's insights regarding the role of the Al-Aqsa in danger libel in the narrative, as delineated by Kuperwasser.

time. *Muqawama* has various manifestations: boycotting Israel (BDS), diplomatic activity, and the Popular Struggle – often under the slogan Al-Aqsa in danger – which includes ramming attacks, stabbing attacks, stone throwing or throwing Molotov cocktails.¹⁴

► Thus, the Al-Aqsa in danger libel has been a highly effective religious trigger for motivating Popular Terrorism, many lone wolf attacks and, more often than not, organized terrorist attacks as well. It was – and still is – an instrument and an essence at one and the same time. It also embodies the complete mixing and lack of separation in Islam between religion and nationality, in the spirit of the saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: “Religion and state are twins.”¹⁵ The libel evokes strong, religious and nationalist feelings among the masses. It also makes no distinction whatsoever between Israeli Arabs and the Arabs of Judea and Samaria and East Jerusalem when it comes to Al-Aqsa and the Temple Mount – the place that reunited them after the Six Day War.

Libel-inspired attacks

► 13-year-old Hallel Yaffa Ariel was stabbed to death in her sleep in the early morning of June 30, 2016, at home on the outskirts of Kiryat Arba. The murderer, 19-year-old Mohammad Tarayrah from the neighboring Palestinian village of Bani Na'im, chose his victim randomly. After murdering Hallel, he managed to severely wound one of the members of the rapid response squad who hurried to the site, before he was shot to death.

► The murderer from Bani Na'im was convinced that the Jewish history of the holiest place for the Jewish people, the site of both temples, was a false history, that the Jews had stolen the holy site from the Muslims, and that they were about to demolish it. This was what he had heard hundreds of times on Palestinian media from the Palestinian religious and political leadership. There were also indications of that: several months before murdering Hallel Yaffa, several posts on the Al-Aqsa Mosque appeared on Tarayrah's Facebook page. One of them, so it seems, epitomized his simplistic perception: “We are Palestinians. Al-Aqsa is our mosque. Liberation is our mission.”

► The profile of the murderer Tarayrah characterized many of the terrorists and murderers who operated in Israel during that time. Between October 2015 and October 2016, Israelis were attacked by about 340 Palestinian lone wolf terrorists. Most of the attacks were

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *More Conversations about Islam*, Ministry of Defense, p. 45.

stabbing attacks, and there were a few ramming attacks. In contrast to the pattern known from previous years, most of the terrorists acted without the guidance of an organization and often seemed as if they were copying each other or being “infected” by each other.¹⁶ Within one year, 39 people were murdered, most of them Jews. A total of 160 terrorists were killed while perpetrating or attempting to perpetrate attacks.

► The biography of the murderer Tarayrah resembles that of many of these terrorists. He also was a dropout. He worked at a bakery for a living. Like many of the terrorists, he also had a close friend or relative who was shot to death in a similar attack. In his case, it was his cousin Yusuf Walid Mostafa Tarayrah, also from the village of Bani Na'im. The cousin was shot to death three months earlier, when trying to run over Israeli civilians. Tarayrah was also influenced by the death of Majd al-Khadour from his own village. A week before the murder of Hallel Yafeh, she carried out a ramming attack at the junction at the entrance to Kiryat Arba. Tarayrah explicitly wrote about his will to become a shaheed. He spoke about his intention to follow in the footsteps of his cousin and the terrorist Majd al-Khadour from his own village. He posted a poem praising and glorifying Majd al-Khadour and even described the “pleasant paradise” awaiting shaheeds.¹⁷ Tarayrah, like many others, longed to die. He wrote that explicitly in one of his last posts on Facebook: “Death is a right and I demand my right.”¹⁸

► The murderer Tarayrah, as attested by his haircut and looks, was not a devout Muslim or religious at all. Nevertheless, he sensed the “insult of Al-Aqsa” in his heart. Other murderers who were preoccupied by the Al-Aqsa cause drew directly on religion and it was an inseparable part of their lives. More often than not, there were also other motives in the background: the [Israeli] occupation, the situation in Jerusalem, the Judaization of Jerusalem, poverty. Some of the terrorists were suffering from various personal problems and there were also others with suicidal tendencies. They all channeled their tendencies toward one basic factor which has been there all along and is still there today: the “threatened Al-Aqsa” which is “in danger.” Many others lived and breathed the Al-Aqsa in

¹⁶ Dr. Harel Horev, ‘Wave of lone wolf attacks and Palestinian social media. Legitimacy and a social plague,’ *Terrorism and Political Violence*, July 2017.

¹⁷ See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from July 12, 2016, ‘The Social Networks as a Source of Inspiration and Emulation, and a Platform for Expression of Palestinian Terrorists: The Case of Muhammad Tarayrah, who murdered a 13-year-old girl in her sleep in Kiryat Arba’

¹⁸ The information on the murderer was taken from an investigative report on his life and characteristics written by Israeli security officials.

danger libel. They were in no need for encouragement, background or other reasons to act. The basic factor which has been the common denominator of the hundreds of terrorists who acted on the streets of Israel from July 2014 was Al-Aqsa or “Al-Aqsa is in danger.” It was a religious nationalist or nationalist religious motive.

Eldest brother of Shabab Al-Aqsa

► One of those terrorists was Misbah Abu Sbeih (39) from East Jerusalem, who carried out an attack three months after Tarayrah. On the morning of October 9, 2016, Abu Sbeih drove his car from the French Hill junction in Jerusalem towards Ammunition Hill and began shooting at people at the Light Rail stop on Sderot Bar-Lev. Jerusalem resident Levana Malihi (60), a former Knesset employee, was killed. The murderer continued speeding towards the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, where he shot a woman driving her car near the Clermont-Ganneau junction. Finally, he stopped his car at the side of a nearby road to return fire at an elite police reconnaissance team chasing him on their motorcycles. One of the policemen who tried to stop the terrorist, Yosef Kirma, 29, was severely wounded during the exchange of fire and later died of his wounds. Other members of the team shot and killed Abu Sbeih.¹⁹



**Right: The murderer Misbah Abu Sbeih (photo from social media, p. 38 in Nadav Shragai’s book).
Left: Distributing candy after the murder (poster of the Islamic bloc in An-Najah University, Facebook, p. 38 in Nadav Shragai’s book)**

► Abu Sbeih, resident of Kafr Aqab, who visited in Silwan many times, had an Israeli ID card which allowed him to move freely within the Green Line. He belonged to the Murabitoun movement, founded by the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel. Murabitoun members set themselves the goal of deterring Jews from visiting the Temple Mount,

¹⁹ The details of the incident are taken from Wikipedia and reports of the main news websites from that day.

disrupting and even preventing their visits there. Palestinian youth in his village used to call Abu Sbeih the “eldest brother of Shabab Al-Aqsa.” Shabab Al-Aqsa, Hamas’s front organization in the Temple Mount and Jerusalem, which was headed by Abu Sbeih, was the Murabitoun’s predecessor. Both movements had the same goal: stopping Jewish visits to the Temple Mount. They both gradually began to engage in violence and then terrorism, and both would eventually be outlawed.²⁰

► Abu Sbeih had a criminal record, most of it related to his activity on the Temple Mount and incitement on social media. One of his most recent photos circulated on social media disclosed his mindset. It shows Abu Sbeih wearing a scarf in the colors of the Hamas flag and holding a picture of Ahmad Yassin, Hamas’s spiritual leader.²¹

► He was influenced by Hamas and the northern branch of the Islamic Movement, and openly identified with them. He also was the prominent figure in one of the groups studying Quran close to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, whose members attempted to prevent Jews from visiting the Temple Mount. There was evidence that he possessed weapons and trained Palestinian youth in their use. According to his acquaintances, he promised to train some of his students in the use of weapons if they managed to “memorize Quran chapters and persist in the morning prayer for 40 days.” In 2015, Sbeih finished a year’s imprisonment for inciting to violence and terrorism. On the morning of the attack, he was about to enter prison once again, for a felony of attacking policemen at one of the Temple Mount gates, but he did not show up to serve his sentence.

► Many of Abu Sbeih’s Facebook posts were somewhat of an indication of what was going to happen: “Jerusalem is rebelling. Jerusalem is a torch of fire. A real intifada in every neighborhood. Those foolish people do not understand that Al-Aqsa is a red line,” Abu Sbeih wrote back in October 2014, “Without Al-Aqsa, there will be blood. Al-Aqsa has men who will redeem it with their blood...” At that time, Abu Sbeih wrote that “Jerusalem is in the mouth of a boiling volcano, about to erupt... The Al-Aqsa Mosque is closed and the children’s murderers invade it on a daily basis,” but “Jerusalem started a revolution which does not consist of stones only...” In another post only two days before his attack, on the 26th anniversary of the violent incidents on the Temple Mount in October 1990, Abu Sbeih wrote that “this day is the day of renewal of the oath with the Al-Aqsa Mosque.” He wrote, “The Al-

²⁰ Imri Sadan, ‘He who memorizes Quranic chapters will be trained by me in the use of weapons,’ Walla News, October 14, 2016.

²¹ Roy Yanovsky et al., ‘Why wasn’t he behind bars?’ Ynet, October 9, 2016.

Aqsa Mosque is bleeding,” admitting that he was envious of the shaheeds and wanted to be like them and share their fate. “Al-Aqsa is being burned every day for 47 years, awaiting someone who will put out the flames,”²² Abu Sbeih described his feelings in another post, “... in spite of their prisons, my love to you only increases. My love to you has been jailed for four months... I longed for Al-Aqsa... Don’t abandon the Al-Aqsa Mosque.”²³

► Like Tarayrah, “Al-Aqsa’s eldest brother” was so clear in his statements, both on Facebook and on the ground, before residents in Silwan and on the Temple Mount, so clear that it is hard to understand why he was not detained and imprisoned in good time, before the Israeli policemen killed him and stopped his murder spree. His association with the northern branch of the Islamic Movement and its leader Sheikh Ra’ed Salah was also clear, if not on the level of action then in terms of ideology. Such an association characterized many of the Al-Aqsa in danger perpetrators.

A kitchen knife

► However, there was no need to be a “celebrity” like Misbah Abu Sbeih in order to be exposed to the clearly worded doctrine presented by the members of the northern branch and their leader Salah on the issue of Al-Aqsa in danger. Arab children and youth as well, mainly from Jerusalem, were exposed to that. Following that, they too decided to become Al-Aqsa shaheeds.

► They were two cousins, 13 and 15-year old children from the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Beit Hanina. The older among them stabbed and critically wounded 12-year-old Naor Ben Ezra²⁴ and was subsequently shot to death. The story of these two cousins shocked even the most veteran police and Israel Security Agency (ISA) investigators. Even those investigators, who were most closely acquainted with the Al-Aqsa in danger terrorism and its perpetrators and thought they had seen everything, found it difficult to recall any similar precedent.

²² Here, Abu Sbeih alludes to the burning of the Al-Aqsa Mosque by a young mentally disturbed Australian, 47 years earlier, on August 21, 1969.

²³ See the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from November 3, 2016, ‘Analysis of the modus operandi of the shooting attack carried out from a driving car in Jerusalem, and of the perpetrator’s profile, shows unique characteristic;’ Roy Yanovsky et al, *ibid*, Ynet, October 9, 2016.

²⁴ Yael Friedson and Ran Shechnik, ‘The miracle of Naor, who was critically wounded in a terrorist attack,’ Ynet, October 29, 2015.

► On September 11, 2015, a month before carrying out the attack, the two cousins attended the 20th Al-Aqsa in Danger rally in the Arab Israeli city of Umm al-Fahm.²⁵ The organizers of the rally, the last in a series of rallies bearing the same name, were Sheikh Ra'ed Salah and his movement, the northern branch of the Islamic Movement.

► The rally was also attended by other young Palestinians who later set out to carry out Al-Aqsa in danger attacks. One of them was Alaa Ahmad Zayoud from Umm al-Fahm, who several weeks afterwards ran over and stabbed soldiers and civilians at the Gan Shmuel junction. Another was Abd Dawiyat, one of those who threw the rocks at the Jerusalem Arnona neighborhood on September 13, 2015, causing the death of Alexander Levlovich. Dawiyat went to carry out this stone throwing attack wrapped in the Hamas flag which he received at the Al-Aqsa in Danger rally. The two children, the cousins from Jerusalem, who set out together for the Jewish neighborhood of Pisgat Zeev and critically stabbed a boy their age, also participated in that same rally and were influenced by it.

► Ra'ed Salah was also the star in that rally. He was shouting there, not for the first time, that for Al-Aqsa, which Israel intends to demolish, Muslims would be ready to die, to sacrifice their blood and become shaheeds. The crowd replied to him in rhythmic, roaring shouts: "With spirit and blood we will redeem Al-Aqsa." Later on, Salah's words were disseminated by Hamas's websites and networks and took on an even more radicalized form. Martial music and photos of terrorists, attacks and casualties were added to them. The message (like other similar messages) was clear-cut and served its purpose. Dozens of terrorists went to carry out stabbing, ramming and shooting attacks to murder Jews and die for Al-Aqsa.²⁶ The story of the two children, the cousins from Beit Hanina, was one of the incidents that led the media to dub the wave of terrorism "children's terrorism," but it was first and foremost "the Al-Aqsa kindergarten terrorism," in the words of an ISA investigator.

► Even though the older cousin of the two actually carried out the stabbing, the younger one, aged 13, was convicted of attempted murder. But the Israeli public was less interested in the legal proceeding. The question remaining unanswered was what was going on in the minds of two children who left their home at noon and randomly stabbed a boy their age.

²⁵ This was apparently revealed in the investigation of the incident and also from what one of them posted on his Facebook page. See Shaul Bartal and Hillel Frisch, 'Are Lone Wolves Really Acting Alone? The Wave of Terror 2008-2015,' *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* no. 132, the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, May 2017, p. 19.

²⁶ Nadav Shragai, 'On the mouth of a volcano,' Israel HaShavua magazine section, Israel Hayom, July 20, 2017.

- ▶ Two days after the stabbing attack, Orly Noy published an interview on the Local Call website with Abdel Karim Lafi, an architect, former chairman of the East Jerusalem parents committee. Their conversation was about the general situation in East Jerusalem and the Israeli authorities' neglect there. However, before long they went on to discuss the stabbing attack in Pisgat Zeev. Noy was wondering, "... a 13-year-old boy who takes a knife and goes to stab a boy his age, is it an extreme act on a totally different level?"
- ▶ Lafi answered, "Al-Aqsa is a religion. It's not politics. Maybe Jews will find it difficult to understand, but with us, in our religion, people believe that if you get killed defending your mosque, you are a shaheed. You are selected. Children may find it very attractive... **The Al-Aqsa Mosque is not a red line. It is red blood...**" Lafi expressed his disappointment with the Israeli establishment, but on the other hand asserted that "**the Palestinian people went out of their mind.**"²⁷
- ▶ Indeed, the belief that "Al-Aqsa is in danger" or "Al-Aqsa is threatened by the Jews and the State of Israel" has had an element of madness. What created and enhanced this element was the combination of this belief and shahada. The madness was stressed and epitomized, inter alia, in the profile of many of the Al-Aqsa in danger terrorists, whose motives were ostensibly incomprehensible, much more personal.
- ▶ Unlike the terrorists Tarayrah, Abu Sbeih or the older boy among the cousins, the basic motive among the "incomprehensible" terrorists was less ideological, religious or national. Personal distress was what led them to murder Jews. Prima facie, this distress was unrelated to the issue of Al-Aqsa or shahada, but these two consciousness components adopted by the "distressed" terrorists helped them, socially and publicly, to "whitewash" their distress. They turned them from rejected into acceptable in Palestinian society.
- ▶ Only a society behaving in an irrational and unbalanced manner with regard to Al-Aqsa and shahada could hide and obfuscate the problems and distress of the most problematic and individuals in distress among it and award them a place of honor in its national and religious pantheon, and all that – just because they perpetrated attacks against Jews. We will elaborate further on that, but first, let us review a less known study as the first step towards clarifying matters.

²⁷ Orly Noy, 'East Jerusalem youngsters have lost faith in the adults, in life and peace,' Local Call website, October 14, 2015.

Lone wolves in the pack

► In May 2017, two researchers, Dr. (retired IDF lieutenant colonel) Shaul Bartal and Prof. Hillel Frisch, published their study: “Are Lone Wolves Really Acting Alone? The Wave of Terror 2008-2015.”²⁸ The two disagreed with the opinion prevailing at the time among senior officials of Israel’s security establishment, according to which terrorists in the waves of attacks during those years operated spontaneously, with no clear association with organizations such as Hamas or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and therefore it will be difficult to thwart their activity ahead of time as is the case with organized squads. The then Defense Minister Moshe (Bogie) Ya’alon, Internal Security Minister Gilad Erdan and Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot spoke on the lone wolf terrorism at the time.

► On the other hand, academic researchers such as Prof. Gabi Weiman, Prof. Itzhak Weissman and Dr. Shaul Bartal, who was one of the authors of the new study, were of the opinion that it would be a mistake to describe the terrorists as lone wolves. Bartal and Frisch found that those were mostly terrorists affiliated with organizations or from families affiliated with Hamas, also praying in or belonging to extremely radical mosques.

► Weiman, one of the veteran experts on terrorism on social media²⁹, also chose to describe the lone wolves in a different manner. He shared his impressions and findings with participants of the 16th conference of the Institute of Counterterrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya in 2016:³⁰

► “There is almost no such creature,” Prof. Weiman said on the lone wolves. “In my research,” he said, “I examined 97 such lone wolves who acted for the past few years in the West. They were part of a pack. We examined the traces they left behind on the web. We went back. We saw where they visited, what films they watched, with whom they corresponded, and our insight was that they were not really lone wolves. This also holds true with regard to the lone wolves in the recent wave of terrorism here in Israel. Almost all of them visit social media, correspond and download material. They are part of a virtual pack...”³¹

²⁸ Bartal and Frisch, *ibid.*

²⁹ Weiman was chosen by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to plan and set up the organization’s terrorism instruction and research program.

³⁰ Nadav Shragai, ‘Disconnecting terrorism from the network,’ Israel Hayom website, September 16, 2016.

³¹ *Ibid.*

► Bartal and Frisch found in their research that most of the terrorists in the waves of terrorism since 2008, including during the waves of terrorism that broke out in July 2014 and October 2015, had acted with affiliation to organizations, especially Hamas. Sometimes it was a family relationship with other known operatives of the terrorist organizations, mostly a first degree relationship. Sometimes they were activists of student blocs affiliated with organizations, such as Al-Qutla al-Islamiyya (affiliated with Hamas) or Al-Rabita al-Islamiyya (affiliated with the PIJ). However, the two researchers noted that **“The initiative, planning and implementation** were not related to the organizational system to which the terrorists belonged or to any other organization.”³² Bartal and Frisch revealed in their research that 61 of the 74 terrorists who operated in Jerusalem between October 2015 and May 2016 (82%) were indeed acting on their own initiative, but were also affiliated ideologically with terror organizations.

► Their research listed many pages of terrorist attacks in Jerusalem between August 2014 and May 2016. It included 71 attacks, some of them with casualties, and examined various parameters characterizing these attacks. Bartal and Frisch stated the reason for each and every attack. They identified a variety of motives and causes, sometimes a few at one and the same time. **My careful examination of the list of terrorists revealed that in 67 out of the 71 attacks examined in the list of Bartal and Frisch (94%), crimes of Jews on the Temple Mount were cited as the only reason or one of the reasons motivating the terrorist.**

Varieties of terrorism

► At the beginning of this essay we embarked on a journey of sorts in the footsteps of attacks and terrorists, and also following some of their associates who carried out attacks before and after the period reviewed by Bartal and Frisch in their research. The overwhelming majority of the terrorists are no longer alive. We tried to understand how much weight they, their family members or the organizations sponsoring their actions attributed to the Temple Mount crimes or Al-Aqsa crimes as the motive for their actions.

► There is no point in dwelling on all of them, but a brief survey can illuminate us about weight and various kinds of emphasis attributed in advance or after the fact to all the Al-

³² Bartal and Frisch, *ibid.*, p. 22.

Aqsa in danger attacks, in all their varieties. Some of them were more obvious, others were less clear, but the “threatened Al-Aqsa” was there all along.

► For some of them, it was enough to pray in Al-Aqsa before they set out to perpetrate a stabbing or ramming attack. They probably sought to charge themselves mentally or spiritually. Such was the case of Shurouq Dawiyat, a young student from Bethlehem University, resident of the village of Sur Baher in East Jerusalem. Before setting out she wrote a post to her mother: “My mother, I’m about to become a shaheed. Our high hopes are to be a shaheed for the sake of Allah.” Then Shurouq told her mother that she was going to the university as usual, but added that before that, she wished to go and pray in the Al-Aqsa Mosque.³³ On October 7, 2015, she attacked Daniel Rosenfeld with a kitchen knife on Hagai Street in the Old City of Jerusalem, moderately wounding him.³⁴

► Saeed Qumbuz, resident of the Old City of Jerusalem, who in December 2015 frequently watched videos on the Internet about suicide bombings and life after death, also visited the Al-Aqsa Mosque on December 27, 2015, prayed there devoutly, and only then stabbed a young soldier near the Chords Bridge, at the entrance to Jerusalem. The District Court sentenced him to 17 years in prison.³⁵

► The two cousins who attempted to carry out a stabbing attack with scissors at Mahane Yehuda Market in Jerusalem on November 2015, in revenge for the death of the brother of one of them (a Fatah operative) in an IDF shooting two years before, also prayed in the Al-Aqsa Mosque before carrying out their attack. Then they attacked a 64-year-old Arab whom they thought by mistake to be a Jew, stabbing him in the neck and back. One of them was shot to death. The other was seriously wounded and eventually brought to justice.^{36 37}

► Baraa Issa, who stabbed and wounded an Israeli in November 2015 near a supermarket in the area of Shaar Binyamin, wrote that he was “dedicating myself to guarding the Al-Aqsa

³³ Elior Levy, ‘Young, concerned about the fate of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and influenced by Facebook: This is the lone wolf terrorist,’ Ynet, October 9, 2015.

³⁴ Yael Friedson, ‘A Palestinian student who carried out a stabbing attack was convicted of an attempted murder,’ Ynet, September 21, 2016.

³⁵ Criminal Appeal 9552/15, at the Supreme Court sitting as a criminal court of appeal.

³⁶ Yehoshua Briner, ‘Went out with a schoolbag to stab Jews: indictment against the scissors terrorist,’ Walla News, December 11, 2015.

³⁷ Ten years before, at the end of the Second intifada, 43-year-old Abdel Muadh al-Ju’ba from Hebron stabbed two of the students of the Mir Yeshiva on David Street in the Old City of Jerusalem. He also “wished to die near the Al-Aqsa Mosque and defend Islam.” See report by Amos Harel and Arnon Regular, ‘Suspect in the murder of the yeshiva student in Jerusalem was apprehended and admitted: “I wished to avenge the throwing of the pig into Hassan Beck,”’ Haaretz website, October 12, 2015.

Mosque and defending our occupied homeland.”³⁸ The two terrorists who murdered three Jews on a bus by gunshots and stabbing on Olei Hagardom Street in Jerusalem (October 2015), Baha Khalil Alyan and Bilal Abu Ghanem, as revealed by the transcript of Abu Ghanem’s interrogation, also did it “because of Al-Aqsa”³⁹

► In other cases, family members of the murderers and terrorists were the ones who testified to their relation or the relation of their actions to Al-Aqsa: the mother of Mohammad Shamasneh, who attacked an IDF soldier with a knife on a bus in Jerusalem and was shot dead (November 2015) by a policeman, declared after his death: “Allah’s mercy on you, O Mohammad. You waved the flag of Islam above the Al-Aqsa Mosque... We shall liberate Al-Aqsa from their hands. Their end is near.”⁴⁰ Shamasneh’s sister declared that she and his other sisters would also die a shaheed’s death.

► Tamer Waridat, 25, from Dhahiriya (in the Hebron district), who stabbed a Jewish man in a mall in Petah Tikva in October 2015, left a letter to his parents, in which he wrote about the need to protect the Al-Aqsa Mosque and his decision to become a shaheed.⁴¹ Another stabbing perpetrated by two Palestinian children aged 11 and 14 also involved Al-Aqsa. The incident took place in the Light Rail in Pisgat Zeev on November 10, 2015. The two children stabbed and wounded the train’s security guard; he then shot and wounded one of them. The uncle of one of the children later said in an interview on the Palestinian TV program “Good Morning, Jerusalem” that it was obvious to him that “the little hopes of that child were related to the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque.” He said that he had met with his nephew and talked to him. “He is in high spirits,” he reported, “**He always asks me about the Al-Aqsa Mosque. He simply told me, with a considerable measure of naivety: maybe after two actions, they [the Jews] will stop invading the Al-Aqsa Mosque**”⁴²

► The mother of 21-year-old terrorist Omar Yasser Fakhri Sakkafi from Beit Hanina, who in December 2015 rammed Jews with his car, stabbed a policeman and was then shot to death by a soldier, also said that her son’s action was related to Al-Aqsa. She told one of the TV channels that she was ready to give birth every day to a new Omar and that she was willing

³⁸ Cited on Palestinian Media Watch, from the Support for the Intifada YouTube channel, November 6, 2015.

³⁹ Yehoshua Briner, “I shot the adults, saw them being wounded, and then I ran out of bullets,” Walla website, November 24, 2015.

⁴⁰ Website of Al-Hayat al-Jadida, the Palestinian Authority’s official newspaper, November 1, 2015. Cited on Palestinian Media Watch.

⁴¹ Yehoshua Briner and Gali Ginat, ‘Forgive me, mother,’ Walla News, October 30, 2015.

⁴² The Palestinian Authority official TV, July 22, 2015. Cited on Palestinian Media Watch.

to sacrifice everything for the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Palestine.⁴³ Omar Abdul Hamid Abu Srou, who detonated an IED on bus in Jerusalem, did not leave behind any indication that his action was related to Al-Aqsa. However, as in many other cases, the organization that claimed responsibility or praised the attack – Hamas, in this case – announced that it considered it “a natural response to Israel’s crimes and especially ... the desecration of the Al-Aqsa Mosque.”⁴⁴

Who will protect the mosque?

► In a list of other terrorist attacks, the relation to Al-Aqsa was much more obvious and was described by the perpetrators themselves. Following are eight prominent examples:

- ◆ **Abd al-Rahma al-Shaloudi**, resident of Silwan, ran over and killed 3-month-old baby Chaya Zissel and Karen Jemima Mosquera (22) in October 2014, close to one of the Light Rail stops near French Hill in Jerusalem. He wounded eight others, and only then was shot dead by a policeman. Shaloudi was a Hamas operative who was released from prison a year before. He was the nephew of Muhyi al-Din Sharif, Hamas’s military wing commander who succeeded “Engineer” Yahya Ayyash⁴⁵ (Sharif was killed in 1998). In Shaloudi’s case, the writing was on the wall – the Facebook wall. About a week before he died, Shaloudi posted a photo of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, to which he added the following words: “Al-Aqsa is in danger... Muhammad’s nation... Embark on the Al-Aqsa journey.”⁴⁶

- ◆ **Ali Sobh and Ibrahim Shami** devised a plan to attack Jewish worshippers in one of the synagogues in the city of Acre. In the background, clashes were taking place in the spring of 2016 around the Temple Mount and Al-Aqsa. The two men took advantage of the organized transportation from their village of Jadeidi-Makr to prayers in the Al-Aqsa Mosque, during which they planned various terrorist attacks. They even acquired

⁴³ Report in the ITIC's News on Terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, December 2-8, 2015.

⁴⁴ The Hamas squad to which Abu Srou belonged decided to target bus 12 to mark the 12th anniversary to the targeted killing of Abdel Aziz Rantisi by Israel on April 17, 2004.

⁴⁵ Yahya Ayyash, known as the Engineer, was one of the founders of Hamas’s Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades and one of those responsible for introducing suicide bombing attacks in the 1990s as part of Palestinian terrorism in Israel. These terrorist attacks took the lives of over 100 Israelis. The ISA eliminated Ayyash with a booby-trapped cellphone in 1996.

⁴⁶ Assaf Gibor and Yael Friedson, ‘The perpetrator of the ramming attack in Jerusalem: nephew of the eliminated Hamas leader,’ nrg Ma’ariv, October 22, 2014; ITIC's Information Bulletin from October 23, 2014, ‘A vehicular attack in Jerusalem;’ and news items from the date of the attack and the following day.

weapons to this end. Sobh wished to become a shaheed. The Israeli security services succeeded in thwarting their plans.⁴⁷

◆ **Ibrahim al-Akari**, resident of the East Jerusalem refugee camp of Shuafat, was at home, watching the live broadcast on the incidents taking place in Al-Aqsa on the morning of November 5, 2014. A couple of days before, he posted on his Facebook page a text distributed to the residents of East Jerusalem by the Supreme Muslim Council: an appeal on the residents to arrive for prayers in the mosque in an orderly manner according to division into neighborhoods. Suddenly, according to his wife's testimony, Al-Akari got up agitated by what he saw on TV, left the house and promised to be back within half an hour. A short while afterwards, around 12:00, he ran over and killed Border Police officer Jaddan Assad from the Druze village of Beit Jan, and wounded 13 others near a Light Rail stop on Shimon Ha-Tsadik Street (one of the wounded, Shalom Aharon Baadani, later died of his injuries). Al-Akari was a devout Muslim and a minor Hamas operative. His wife explained that "he saw the blood in Al-Aqsa and went to be a shaheed".⁴⁸

◆ The attack that marked the beginning of a deadly wave of terrorism in late 2015 – the murder of Nehemia Lavi and Aharon Banita on Hagai Street in the Old City of Jerusalem – was carried out by a Palestinian Islamic Jihad member, **Muhannad Shafiq Halabi**, and was also clearly related to Al-Aqsa. Halabi, a 19-year-old student from a village near Ramallah, was eventually shot dead. His accomplice, Abd al-Aziz Marei, resident of Abu Dis, was sentenced to 35 years in prison. Marei told the ISA that the two men arrived at the idea of the attack after they were prevented from entering the Al-Aqsa Mosque (probably after arousing the suspicion of the security forces – N.S.). The day before the attack, Halabi wrote on his Facebook page: "According to what I see, the third intifada has begun. What happens in Al-Aqsa is what happens to our holy sites and the path of our prophet. What happens to the Al-Aqsa women is what happens to our mothers, to our sisters [Halabi referred to the women of the Murabitat – a subsidiary organization of the northern branch of the Israeli Islamic

⁴⁷ Serious Crime Case 26101-05-16 at the Haifa District Court, the State of Israel v. Sobh et al., the verdict.

⁴⁸ Jacky Hougi and Gily Cohen, 'The ramming terrorist is a resident of Shuafat and the brother of one of those released in the Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange deal,' Haaretz website, November 5, 2014; Nir Hasson et al., 'Ramming attack in Jerusalem. One dead and 13 wounded,' Haaretz website, November 5, 2014.

Movement; the organization was engaged in disturbing and blocking Jews' visits to the Temple Mount]. I don't think that the people will accept the humiliation. The people will set out for an intifada".⁴⁹

◆ **Ali Abu Hassan**, a student of civil engineering in the Polytechnic University of Hebron, acquired and prepared several pipe charges to be detonated at the Jerusalem Light Rail in July 2016. He was detained before he managed to execute his plan. On his Facebook page, Abu Hassan wrote before he was caught that "No one is doing anything against the entrance of Jews into Al-Aqsa, and therefore they will persist in doing that".⁵⁰

◆ The case of **Mohammad Saffan** was also clearly related to the Al-Aqsa in danger cause. On the morning of October 19, 2017, a truck owner from Holon called Ituran to report that right in front of him, someone was stealing his truck. The person at the call center hurried to report it to the police. A short while later, the truck was located speeding between the houses of the eastern neighborhoods of Rishon LeZion. Several minutes afterwards it was blocked, and the thief was captured. The policemen of the elite reconnaissance unit who carried out the arrest thought that it was yet another incident of car theft. However, before long they realized their mistake. The 39-year-old Mohammad Saffan from Ramallah, who indeed had been a car thief in the past, told them that he intended to ram soldiers "because of Al-Aqsa." "I wanted to kill soldiers. I do not regret even if I end up in prison... I wanted to run over people because of Al-Aqsa. I wanted to be an Al-Aqsa shaheed..."⁵¹

◆ On a Friday night (July 21, 2017), **Omar Abd al-Jalil** (19), resident of the village of Kobar, entered the house of the Salomon family in the community of Halamish in the Mateh Binyamin Regional Council and stabbed to death three family members who were sitting at the dinner table. The murder took place about a week after the terrorist attack on the Temple Mount by three members of the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, the temporary closure of the Mount because of that, and the crisis that ensued due to the metal detectors placed at the Temple Mount gates after the

⁴⁹ Nir Hasson, '35 years in prison for the Palestinian who aided in the murder of Aaron Bennet and Nehemia Lavi in Jerusalem,' Haaretz website, December 28, 2016; Elior Levy, 'The house of a terrorist who murdered two civilians in Jerusalem was demolished,' Ynet, January 9, 2016.

⁵⁰ Serious Crime Case 13005-08-16 at the Jerusalem District Court, the State of Israel v. Ali Abu Hassan, the sentence.

⁵¹ "I wanted to run over people because of Al-Aqsa," Channel 2 News, Mako, October 20, 2017.

attack. The connection was crystal clear. The murderer himself wrote about it on his Facebook page a short while before he attacked in Halamish: “The Al-Aqsa Mosque is desecrated and we are sleeping. Shame on us if we sit idly by. You, who own worn-out weapons, you who draw your guns only at weddings and celebrations, aren’t you ashamed of yourselves? Why aren’t you declaring war for Allah?”

◆ Nothing alluded to a connection with Al-Aqsa when **Yusuf Kamil and Mohammad Abu al-Roub** from Qabatiya murdered their employer, 70-year-old Reuven Shmerling from Elkana, on October 4, 2017. He was stabbed and beaten to death in a warehouse in the Arab-Israeli city of Kafr Qasim. Ostensibly, Shmerling was murdered after an argument with his workers. However, during the interrogation, the ISA investigators were surprised to find out that the two murderers had watched a lot of videos documenting violent friction between Muslim women and the Israeli security forces in the Al-Aqsa Mosque and were influenced by it.⁵²

Suicidal tendency – and national “salvation”

- ▶ Alongside the obvious Al-Aqsa in danger terrorists, who could be described as such with no difficulty, there were quite a few terrorists whose personal distress and sometimes their suicidal tendencies led them to adopt shahada and the Al-Aqsa in danger libel, and from there to an attack or an attempted attack. Did those terrorists – including adults and youth, women and men – really seek deep inside to become Al-Aqsa shaheeds?
- ▶ The question arises not in order to refute the clear picture of reality as it emerges from dozens of Al-Aqsa in danger attacks carried out successfully or hundreds others which failed or were thwarted. **It arises in order to understand whether the will of those shaheeds is indeed independent, and to what extent; and also in order to understand to what extent Palestinian society has pushed people in distress to become Al-Aqsa shaheeds.**
- ▶ The answer to these questions is rather clear: in quite a few cases, reality (which is also backed by research) indicates that the Al-Aqsa shaheeds first suffered from significant personal distress which was not religious or national. Palestinian society, which is not an open society, has not been able to contain their distress nor has it provided them with professional tools to enable them to cope with it. Thus, many of them preferred to channel their severe personal problems to another place: to religion and nationalism, and to the

⁵² Serious Crime Case 56838-10-17, the State of Israel v. Yusuf Kamil and Muhammad Abu al-Roub, verdict from July 19, 2018.

path of terrorism, drawing inspiration from the dual Palestinian ethos of Al-Aqsa in danger and shahada.

► Their choice of terrorism derived first and foremost from the distorted and false values adopted by Palestinian society and its leaders on the issues of Al-Aqsa and shahada. Distortions and lies which became a worldview have led some of the Al-Aqsa shaheeds, of whom the predominant factor in their personality was personal distress – to perpetrate attacks.

► Can it exempt the perpetrators of their responsibility for their actions? Of course not. Most of them – also according to the judgment of the Israeli courts – were clearly able to tell good from bad and were even found fit to stand trial.⁵³ And yet, a major part of the responsibility for the actions of the Al-Aqsa shaheeds who were in distress lies with Palestinian society, that adds the distressed shaheeds of Al-Aqsa to the “normative” shaheeds of Al-Aqsa, and in fact directs and encourages them to resort to this solution as a remedy to a variety of distress situations.

► And now, let us examine what research has to say about that. During the recent years, two professors who are considered the world’s experts in their field, psychologist Prof. Ariel Merari and Prof. Boaz Ganor, have led (in collaboration with the Ministry of Internal Security) a team of researchers, psychologists and sociologists who examined the increasing phenomenon of lone wolf or independent terrorists.⁵⁴ Their work dealt with the waves of terror attacks in Israel between October 2015 and December 2017. Their study was based on a database which includes 700 terrorists who took part in 560 attacks; they were acting alone or in collaboration with others (friends or relatives), yet without operational assistance from any organization.

⁵³ This, for example, was said by Tamer Waridat, who decided “to defend the Al-Aqsa Mosque” and stabbed a Jew in Petah Tikva on October 7, 2015. Waridat claimed that the background for his action was not nationalist, and that it only stemmed from personal distress, mental health problems, and a quarrel with his wife. The court rejected that out of hand (Serious Crime Case 62711-10-15, the State of Israel v. Waridat, the verdict of the Lod District Court).

⁵⁴ Citations and information on this research are taken from the announcement of the Ministry of Internal Security from June 12, 2018. In 2002-2009, Merari served as the scientific director of the research on Palestinian suicide terrorism on behalf of Israel’s National Security Council. Prof. Boaz Ganor is the founder and executive director of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) and dean of the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel.

► The study of Merari and Ganor⁵⁵ included a representative sample of long personal interviews with 45 lone wolf terrorists in Israeli prisons. The Israel Prison Service and the terrorists themselves were fully cooperative. Findings among 45 interviewees revealed that “in the background of the attack, there is a combination of motives: **psychological circumstances, ideological motives, and personal circumstances.**” Alongside the above, many a time the researchers also found triggering events, such as copycat attacks, geopolitical events, and traumatic events. As it was revealed, all these were enhanced by deliberate incitement. Among 60% of the boys in the sample, 28% of the men and 11% of the women, the ideological motive (nationalist and religious) was found to be influential in taking the decision.

► **However, two-thirds of all the terrorists who were included in the sample of personal interviews suffered from a mental disorder, psychosis or suicidal tendency. A high number of the respondents had suicidal tendencies and 54% of the respondents even noted that they would have preferred to die in the attack.**⁵⁶

► The interview sample revealed that the incidence of family problems was particularly high among female terrorists, but not only among them.

► The research dealt with all terrorists and not only the Al-Aqsa in danger ones. They all presented a variety of reasons for their actions, but there were quite a few who associated their action with the story of Al-Aqsa (or others did so on their behalf). The fact that many terrorists had suicidal tendencies and would have preferred to die in the attack was not surprising. What was surprising was their percentage – as stated, **over half of the respondents!**

► Merari and Ganor's research was still confidential in the summer of 2019. However, newspapers and other sources provide quite a few examples of terrorists who suffered from various forms of personal distress, some of whom even explicitly said they wished to die. Many of them combined their own personal distress with the “distress” of the “endangered

⁵⁵ The interviews were held at least several months after the attacks. For more details about the study and for a conversation about it with Prof. Merari, see Nadav Shragai, ‘The new suicide terrorists,’ Israel Hayom, August 24, 2018.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Al-Aqsa.” Many of them subsequently earned the title of shaheed by virtue of that combination.⁵⁷

Depression, unrequited love, and family quarrel

► In March 2016, **Mona Fadwa Abu Tir**, a mother of five whose family was affiliated with Hamas, attempted to stab Jews in the Old City of Jerusalem and was shot dead. According to the ISA, she was suffering from persistent depression and probably sought to die. Her family members hung near their home in the village of Umm Tuba (in East Jerusalem) a big poster with photos of their mother and the Dome of the Rock.

► In July 2018, **Ahmed Mohammad Mahamid** from Umm al-Fahm, who according to his family had been treated at the Sha’ar Menashe mental health center and was also hospitalized due to psychiatric problems, went out of the Temple Mount through the Council Gate, armed with a knife. He charged the nearest policeman and attempted to stab him. Policemen standing nearby shot and killed him. His relatives testified that he was not a devout Muslim and that they were surprised by his very visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. His status underwent a rapid “upgrade:” from “distressed” located low on the Palestinian scale, he went straight up to the national-religious pantheon of Palestinian shaheeds. His funeral, held three days later, was attended by thousands. The crowd promised to redeem Al-Aqsa with blood and fire.⁵⁸

► In early March 2016, **Fouad Tamimi** opened fire at Israeli policemen at Herod’s Gate in Jerusalem, severely wounded one of them and was shot dead. He was also a thief and a drug addict. Nevertheless, on March 9, 2016, his photo appeared on the Facebook page of the Fatah movement alongside photos of two terrorists who carried out other attacks, with the inscription: “Respect to all those killed the day before yesterday while carrying out three separate attacks. Blessed be the shaheeds...”

► In July 2017, **Abdullah Taqatqa** from Beit Fajjar, who according to the IDF was mentally disturbed, attempted to commit a suicide by charging with a knife at Israeli soldiers and was shot dead. Hamas released a death notice with his photo alongside the photo of the Dome of the Rock.

⁵⁷ Shabtay Bendet, ‘Not only Al-Aqsa and incitement: Many of the terrorists acted because of personal distress,’ Walla News, March 10, 2016; Nadav Shragai, ‘The new suicide terrorists,’ Israel Hayom, August 24, 2018.

⁵⁸ Nadav Shragai, ‘The new suicide terrorists,’ Israel Hayom, August 24, 2018.

- ▶ In early March 2016, **Amani Sabatin**, a mother of four from the village of Hussan, who had quarreled with her husband and was in severe mental distress, attempted to run over soldiers at the Gush Etzion junction and was shot dead. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas sent a letter of condolence to her parents and family, in which he wrote: “The shaheeda Amani Husni Jawad al-Sabatin saturated the land of Palestine with her pure blood”.⁵⁹
- ▶ On October 8, 2015, **Subhi Abu Khalifa** stabbed a yeshiva student near the French Hill junction in Jerusalem and severely wounded him. The indictment against him referred to the fact that it was his girlfriend who urged him to carry out the attack. At first, he wrote to his girlfriend that he intended to carry out an attack. Then he informed her that he would do it the following day. She dismissed his statements. She wrote to him that in the past as well, he had promised to be a shaheed but had done nothing. Abu Khalifa replied to her that the following day he would become a shaheed, and indeed, the following day he stabbed the yeshiva student.⁶⁰
- ▶ On March 9, 2016, **Ahmad Yusuf Amer**, from a Samaria village, attempted to stab soldiers at a checkpoint south of Elkana and was shot dead. According to a suicide note which he left behind, he owed three people small sums of money. He wrote to his parents: “Mother and Father, forgive me... It is Allah’s will.”⁶¹
- ▶ In July 2017, **Omar Ahmad Lutfi Khalil** (34) carried out a shooting attack north of Jerusalem, together with his fiancée. According to the ISA, he did it due to the fact that their families did not recognize the relationship between them. When security forces tried to stop him, he tried to pull out a weapon and resist and was shot dead.⁶²
- ▶ In January 2016, **Ruqayya Abu Eid** (13) from the village of Anata tried to stab a security guard at the Anatot checkpoint. She actually ran to her death, furious and frustrated following a quarrel with her sisters.⁶³

⁵⁹ Nir Hasson et al., ‘A man severely wounded in a terrorist attack at the Damascus Gate,’ Haaretz website, March 9, 2016; Elisha Ben Kimon and Elior Levy, ‘A mother of four and a terrorist,’ Yedioth Ahronoth website – Ynet, March 5, 2016.

⁶⁰ According to the indictment against Khalifa. It was cited by Yedioth Ahronoth, in its 7 Days magazine section from November 4, 2015, in a report by Amir Shuan.

⁶¹ Nir Hasson et al., ‘A man severely wounded in a terrorist attack at the Damascus Gate,’ Haaretz website, March 9, 2016.

⁶² Yohai Ofer, ‘He went on a shooting attack because his family did not recognize his engagement,’ nrg, July 16, 2017.

⁶³ ‘The suicide terrorists behind the knives,’ Review of the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories from March 9, 2017.

- ▶ In November 2015, **Issam Thawabta** (34) from Beit Fajjar, a regular patient at the Hospital for the Mentally Ill in Bethlehem, stabbed Hadar Buchris (21) to death at the Gush Etzion junction. He was killed by an Israeli soldier.⁶⁴
- ▶ A., whose girlfriend left him and it broke his heart, decided to prove to her by attacking Jews that she did not appreciate him adequately.⁶⁵
- ▶ In the overwhelming majority of these and similar cases, Palestinian society embraced the terrorists who acted out of personal distress or the mentally ill and presented them as shaheeds, many times as Al-Aqsa shaheeds. In most of these cases, displays of joy, admiration and glorification for their actions were so many, virtually the same as for the actions of the “normative” terrorists. All of them turned into heroes.

Sedatives for the mothers of shaheeds

- ▶ These expressions of joy, which are very foreign to Jewish society (and Western society in general), were not always authentic and did not always reflect reality and the true feelings of those who rejoiced at funerals of shaheeds. This understanding is also important in the matter at hand, since it attests to the enormous pressure exerted by Palestinian society not only on the shaheeds, but also on their families.
- ▶ Here is additional research-based evidence by Dr. Ronit Marzan, research fellow at the Chaikin Chair of Geostrategy at the University of Haifa School of Political Science. Dr. Marzan served in the IDF Unit 8200 and as a knowledge expert at the Prime Minister’s Office for 19 years, expanding her knowledge of the linguistic, cultural and religious practices of Arab society.
- ▶ In light of the expressions of joy among the mothers of shaheeds, as documented by the media, Marzan published an article that did not receive much attention: “**The Mothers of Shaheeds: a View from a Different Perspective.**”⁶⁶ In her article, Marzan describes her view of the plight of shaheeds’ mothers, based on her professional experience and as a researcher involved in what is happening in Palestinian society:

“At the time of their children’s birth and at the time of their burial as shaheeds – their wombs are nationalized for the benefit of the nation’s

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid. See there more examples of terrorists who were mentally ill or suffered from various personal distresses.

⁶⁶Ronit Marzan, *The Mothers of Shaheeds: a View from a Different Perspective*, The Forum for Regional Thinking, June 17, 2016.

empowerment, and with the death of their sons they gain a new religious-social status, i.e., mothers of shaheeds. Their private loss has become the collective loss of the nation. They must conquer their grief and their tears, be proud of their sons' courage, and thank Allah for the great privilege of participating in ceremonies glorifying the shaheed.

Giving sedatives to mothers of shaheeds, and sometimes even removing them from the body of the dead son without their being able to hug and kiss him before his burial, are part of the male need to ensure that the son's funeral is a show of strength, pride and respect, not of hysterical crying.

Men are not content with their control over our lives, our marriages and our destinies. They want to impose laws on our tears as well, say some of the mothers of Palestinian shaheeds, who are required to rejoice instead of mourning the loss of their sons.

- In her article, Marzan reports on studies conducted by Prof. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Dr. Maria Holt and Dr. Maram Masarwa, as well as the psychiatrist Eyad al-Sarraj, who reported that “the silenced voice of shaheeds’ mothers is gaining a sympathetic ear in Palestinian mental health centers.”

The mothers of the shaheeds, Dr. Marzan notes, “*describe their incessant confrontations with their angry and desperate children, who prefer to die in order to live in the next world, rather than live as the dead in this world. They challenge their being tagged as bad mothers who raise their sons to sanctify death instead of sanctifying life, and recount their day-to-day monitoring of their children to make sure they do not intend to embark on a campaign of revenge over the deaths of relatives and friends [...] The mothers admit to the psychotherapists treating them that they wanted to marry off their sons to brides in this world, and not in the next world, and wished for grandchildren to fill the empty space in the house that was built for them [...].*”⁶⁷

- One of the researchers whose findings and conclusions Marzan relied on is Dr. Maram Masarwa, author of the book: *The Religio-politicization of Bereavement in Palestinian*

⁶⁷For more information on Dr. Marzan’s article and the studies that she cites, see the article: “The Joy of the Mothers of Palestinian ‘Martyrs,’” from December 5, 2001, on the MEMRI website. See there the remarks of I’tidal al-Jariri, a mental health expert and member of the Palestinian Association for Working Women.

Society – Gender, Religion and Nationality. Masarwa suggested that Palestinian parents who had lost loved ones as a result of violent political activity found themselves in a reality where the boundary between the individual and society tends to become blurred. In her study, Masarwa chose to deal with Palestinian parents from Judea and Samaria (20 pairs of parents), whose sons and daughters were killed in the Al-Aqsa Intifada but not as suicide bombers. It can be assumed that many of her conclusions are also relevant to the parents of the suicide bombers. Masarwa writes about the “social appropriation of personal bereavement” and finds that it “always manages to place the national interest above the private lives of individuals.”⁶⁸

► Her book teaches that “in Palestinian society where there is a Muslim majority, the use of religion as a source of supreme authority” is the way of nationalism “to structure and shape the perception of bereavement as part of the collective consciousness.” In her study, Masarwa suggests conceptualizing this combination in a new term, which she calls: religio-politicization. Religio-politicization, by definition, is “a manipulative process in which the agents of nationality use certain parts of religion in order to promote and serve the political agenda in society at any given time.” Religio-politicization, according to Masarwa, “is the first and most central dimension in the engineering and design of bereavement culture in Palestinian society.”⁶⁹

► Marzan and Masarwa describe an aspect that Israeli society is almost unaware of. As stated, this aspect is important in the case at hand because it also testifies to the overpowering and forceful pattern of Palestinian society, which embraces the ostensibly distressed and mentally disturbed terrorists, presenting them as shaheeds, and often as Al-Aqsa shaheeds. Some mothers of shaheeds, as Marzan and the Palestinian researchers whose findings she cites describe, are in fact forced by that selfsame forceful pattern, and their personal distress is nationalized.

► Not only researchers and academics have considered this. The courts in Israel also addressed it from time to time. In December 2017, Yassin Abu al-Qara stabbed security guard Asher Elmaliach at the Jerusalem Central Bus Station, seriously wounding him. Abu al-Qara explained to his interrogators that he had done this “to defend Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa

⁶⁸In this context, it is worth noting that various Palestinian groups are involved in the appropriation of shahada, among other things, due to internal competition between them.

⁶⁹Dr. Maram Masarwa, *The Religio-politicization of Bereavement in Palestinian Society*, Resling, 2015, from the introduction to the book.

Mosque.” In sentencing him, Justices Noam, Friedman-Feldman and Abravanel referred to the phenomenon of shahada and to the realization of this ideology while exploiting those in mental distress, and wrote, inter alia:

*“The ideology of longing to become a shaheed by murdering others – which makes death the goal and the murderer a so-called martyr and a source of admiration – is a murderous ideology that is spread widely, like poison and venom, in diverse systems of wild incitement.” It is “adopted to the point of realization, both by extremist zealots for this ideological way and by others who are easily tempted, such as children, young people **and those in distress, including mental distress”**(emphasis added by the author).⁷⁰*

In the throes of madness

- ▶ Be that as it may, not only are the diverse Al-Aqsa in danger terrorists categorized by Palestinian society as shaheeds, they are categorized as elite shaheeds: **Al-Aqsa shaheeds**. The fact that many mentally disturbed and distressed individuals manage to divest themselves of the label that had banished them from society by carrying out terrorist attacks inspired by the Al-Aqsa in danger libel, only emphasizes the depth of the willful blindness of Palestinian society when it comes to the ostensibly threatened Al-Aqsa.
- ▶ There are very few, if any, mentally disturbed Jews who have gone out to murder Arabs as a remedy for their personal pain. Even in most countries of the enlightened world there are only a few with problematic personal backgrounds who will seek to remedy their distress by carrying out a suicide bombing attack and murdering members of rival religions or ethnic groups. The obvious conclusion, then, is that the personal distress of a Palestinian who goes out to harm Jews in general, and to do so in the name of Al-Aqsa in particular, is simply the throes of madness. This madness, however, is fed by a deeply rooted source: a society and an atmosphere that sanctify this type of death, deeming it normal, permissible, and widespread.
- ▶ The root of the problem lies in a society that shifts its most problematic and marginalized individuals – the distressed and the suicidal – from the most undervalued part of society to its most valued part. This sharp transition takes place by virtue of harming Jews. The

⁷⁰Serious Crime Case 59601-12-17, the State of Israel v. Yassin Abu al-Qara, Jerusalem District Court, before Justices Y. Noam, R. Friedman-Feldman and E. Abravanel. Verdict from March 18, 2019, pp. 10, 11.

terrorists – normative and distressed alike – carry out many of their attacks in the name of the so-called danger to Al-Aqsa, and in recent years also in the name of the alleged threat to the status quo on the Temple Mount, and the possibility that Jews will not only visit but will also pray there. From the point of view of the shaheed before his death, he will profit twice. First, he will become a shaheed and ascend to Paradise, and second, his character – even if problematic – will become accepted and admired. Suddenly he will belong.

► It seems that this matter can be summed up with the insights of two researchers. The first, Dr. Michal Morag (Head of the Criminal Profiling Program at Ariel University and lecturer at the Ruppin Academic Center), stated in an interview with Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* in late 2015:

*“In studies carried out with terrorists who survived, they say, ‘Who we were before is completely different from who we are after.’ Most of them improved their financial situation because of what they had done, found a spouse in the wake of their actions, and of course also gained a sense of belonging to their family and society. When they are interviewed, they say: ‘We are the Palestinians.’ **They only felt part of this “we” after the stabbing attack.**”⁷¹*

► The second researcher is Dr. Anat Berko (lieutenant colonel in the IDF reserves and doctor of criminology) who specialized in the study of terrorism, and whose doctoral dissertation was entitled “The Moral Infrastructure of Chief Perpetrators of Suicidal Terrorism: Cognitive and Functionalist Perspective.” Berko relied, inter alia, on field studies that she carried out face-to-face with terrorists at Israel’s most heavily guarded prisons. “From years of experience, information and research in the field, including in prison wings housing young people who carried out terrorist attacks,” says Berko, “terrorists are fueled by social pressure, by the glorification of young people who have already carried out attacks and by the need to belong, especially during adolescence [...] This is a type of reasoning that stems from hatred of the other and from the normalization of violence, which has become something built-in. In my research, I called it: ‘To be a shaheed or not to be’.”⁷²

⁷¹Amir Shuan, 7 Days magazine section, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, November 4, 2015.

⁷²Nadav Shragai, ‘Not Born Yesterday,’ Israel HaShavua magazine section, Israel Hayom, November 27, 2015.

The book can be purchased via the websites of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and Sella Meir Publishing House