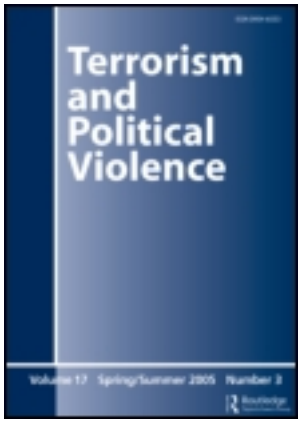

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Making Palestinian "Martyrdom Operations"/"Suicide Attacks": Interviews With Would-Be Perpetrators and Organizers

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This article includes excerpts from the first author's forthcoming book, *Driven to Death: Psychological and Social Aspects of Suicide Terrorism* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

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Knowledge about the ways in which suicide attacks are recruited and prepared and on the motivation of suicide bombers and the factors that influence the decisions of organizers of suicide attacks has so far been sketchy and sporadic, derived mostly from media sources. In this study, 15 Palestinian would-be suicides and 14 organizers of suicide attacks participated in semi-structured interviews designed to fill this lacuna. The paper focuses on the self-reported feelings and behavior of the suicide bombers from recruitment to dispatching, as well as on the organizers' self-reported views and decisions concerning suicide attacks.

Keywords suicide attacks, suicide bombers, suicide organizers, terrorism

Introduction

Only a few of the 2,937 suicide bombers around the globe in the period of 1981–2008 were not sent by organized groups and acted completely on their own. That is, individual initiative and execution of a suicide attack has been extremely rare. As Kramer correctly observed, "while 'self-martyrs' sacrificed themselves, they were also sacrificed by others."[1] The role of the group and, specifically, of organizers of suicide attacks is, therefore, crucial in understanding the making of a suicide bomber, and the organizers' personalities and decision making are central elements in terrorist suicide. This paper presents a systematic study of 15 Palestinian would-be suicides and 14 organizers of suicide attacks that was undertaken in 2002–2005. Demographic details of the would-be suicides and organizers' samples can be found in the paper "Personality Characteristics of 'Self Martyrs"/'Suicide Bombers' and Organizers of Their Attacks" in this volume. The present paper describes the process of preparing and launching suicide attacks as gleaned from the descriptions provided by the organizers and the would-be suicides.[2] While interviews with the organizers were the main source of information on decisions involved in planning and preparing suicide attacks and are thus the main basis for the paper, the would-be suicides provided supplementary (and sometimes contradictory) information on important aspects of the process, such as the ways in which candidates for the suicide missions were recruited. The interviews with the would-be suicides were, of course, the best source of information concerning their own motivation and feelings throughout the process.

The Interviews

In addition to the psychological interviews and tests described in a separate article in this volume, each participant was interviewed by one of four specialists on Palestinian affairs, who were well acquainted with Palestinian society and militant groups. The interviewers used a semi-structured questionnaire, designed to learn about their decisions on the preparations for and management of suicide attacks and the factors that affected them, as well as about their opinions and feelings in this regard. These interviews were also conducted individually and in Arabic.[3]

Differences Between the Groups

A hypothesis underlying the selection of the organizers' sample was that there might be systematic differences between the militant groups and between various regions within the Territories in attitude to suicide operations and in the various aspects

Table 1. Distribution of the organizers' sample by group and region

	Organization			
Region	Hamas	PIJ	Fatah	Total
Samaria	3	4	3	10
Judea	2	1	1	4
Total	5	5	4	14

of preparing them. We surmised, furthermore, that there may be a difference in these respects between the second intifada and the pre-intifada period. An attempt was therefore made to obtain representation of the three main Palestinian groups that launched suicide attacks—Hamas, PIJ, and Fatah—and within each group of the main regions of the Territories, namely, Samaria and Judea (the Northern and Southern parts of the West Bank, respectively), and the Gaza Strip, as well as of organizers before and during the intifada. However, these requirements could be met only partially. Of the fourteen organizers who participated in the study, five were Hamas members, five PIJ, and four belonged to Fatah. Ten of the sample's organizers operated in Samaria, four in Judea, and none in the Gaza Strip. The pre-intifada period was represented by only one organizer, a Hamas member from Samaria. Table 1 summarizes the organizers' distribution.

Most organizers had been involved in the preparation of several suicide attacks. Their indictments and court verdicts provided detailed descriptions of their terrorist activity. On the basis of these data the total number of successful or attempted suicide attacks prepared by the organizers was calculated as 52, an average of 3.7 per organizer in the sample (range: 1–9).

The average number of attacks carried out by a Hamas organizer was half that of a Fatah organizer and a little more than a third of a PIJ organizer. Interpretation of the rate of prepared suicide operations requires, however, consideration of the period for which the organizer was engaged in this activity. These data were found in the organizers' indictments, which listed their terrorist activity by date, allowing calculation of the time span between his first involvement in preparing a suicide attack and the day of his arrest. Indeed, Hamas organizers had spent, on the average, shorter periods in suicide bombing activity than their PIJ and Fatah counterparts, yet this specific difference does not account for the entire difference between the groups' rates of organizing suicide attacks. The mean number of attacks per organizer per month of activity shows that, on the average, Hamas organizers had, indeed, carried out suicide attacks at a slower pace (0.38 attacks per month compared to 0.58 and 0.50 for PIJ and Fatah, respectively). The slower pace was presumably a function of more meticulous preparation. This conjecture is supported by the fact that the ratio of successful to failed attacks for Hamas organizers was more than five times higher than for PIJ and more than six times higher than for Fatah.

Preparing a Suicide Attack

The Decision

The decision to carry out a suicide attack was practically always made at the organization's local echelon. This is clear in the case of Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs'

Brigades, which during most of the second intifada had no central leadership and were merely a cluster of loosely connected local gangs. Yet even Hamas and PIJ, which did have a national political and military leadership, allowed local echelons at the city or regional level to conduct operations as they chose, though within the organization's general policies. General policy guidelines dictated whether or not to carry out attacks at a given moment (e.g., to declare *hudna*—cease-fire—or to escalate the armed struggle), but the decision on specific attacks has been in the hands of the local command of the organizations. All organizers said that the local command had made the decision to carry out suicide attacks (rather than use other tactics) and had chosen their timing and target. The difference between the anarchic Fatah and the hierarchical Hamas and PIJ stood out in the organizers' answers to the question whether they would have suspended suicide attacks had the political leadership of their organization decided to do so. All Hamas organizers and four out of five PIJ organizers said they would obey the political leadership's decision. One Hamas organizer (Mustafa) said: "I follow the Organization's directives to the letter; in Hamas there are no breaches like this." A PIJ organizer (Fares) said: "Military operations stem from the organization's general directives and general policy lines." Three of the four Fatah organizers, however, said they would not obey the organization's directive and would make their own decisions. Two of them viewed themselves as organizationally autonomous, uncommitted to any higher leadership, although they formally operated under the banner of Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades.

All Hamas and most PIJ organizers were loyal to their own organizations rather than to the PNA government. Asked whether they would stop suicide attacks if ordered by the PNA, all Hamas organizers and three of five PIJ organizers said they would obey only their organization's orders. Interestingly, Hamas organizers rejected PNA authority more blatantly than PIJ members. One PIJ organizer (Hassan), for example, said (concerning his response to a PNA order): "I would consult with the political leadership of the organization and act according to its directives." This response implies preference of PIJ leadership over PNA authority but does not totally reject or delegitimize the latter. The answers of Hamas organizers, on the other hand, smacked of contempt toward the PNA: "Only Hamas leadership and headquarters issue instructions; the PNA has no authority. The PNA issues declarations but in practice cannot protect the people" (Amar); "The PNA's instructions do not oblige me; I have no commitment to nor connection with the PNA" (Atallah). A Fatah organizer explained his refusal of PNA orders by the absence of organizational linkage to and sponsorship by the PNA: "I disobeyed the PNA's instructions because they didn't finance me" (Kamal).

In their description of the factors affecting the decision to carry out a suicide attack, all organizers stressed operational considerations, such as the availability of explosives and a candidate for the suicide attack, and ability to reach a target (several organizers mentioned curfews and roadblocks as examples of impediments). These factors implied that capability rather than changes in motivation determined the frequency of attacks. Half of the organizers, however, said that the timing was also a function of the perceived need to respond to Israeli actions.

Recruiting a Candidate for the Suicide Mission

In the interviews the would-be suicide bombers described how they were recruited for the suicide mission. According to their reports, eight of them (53%) volunteered for

the mission on their own initiative. The others were solicited by a recruiter of one of the organizations to undertake a suicide mission. Of the eight volunteers, five had already been affiliated with the organization and approached their contact person in the group with their suicide initiative. The other three got in touch with a person they knew as a militant group operative in their neighborhood or workplace. The group's consent was usually delayed by days or weeks. The volunteers were often eager and kept pressing to be sent immediately on their mission. Samir described his recruitment:

> I spoke with someone from PIJ. I worked with his brother in the same clothing store. I kept begging him to let me do the operation, because he thought that I was not serious. When he was convinced that I was serious he gave me the explosive charge and explained to me how to use it.

Typically, both the volunteers and those solicited for the task, who had not been group members, were not particular about the organization they would soon serve. Hamed said: "I became a Hamas member by chance, because this group's representative came to me before Fatah representatives."

Three of those solicited had been affiliated with the organization before they were approached for the suicide mission, but none of them had been involved in any resistance activity before consenting to carry out the suicide attack.

Three of the seven youngsters solicited by the organization agreed on the spot. Three of the other four thought it over for a week or two before they gave their consent, but the fourth candidate vacillated for four months. The recruiters did not usually try to convince the candidates to carry out a suicide operation. Yet sometimes they did exert pressure, as in the case of Salah, with whom the recruiting efforts amounted to an aggressive sales campaign. The process started when a neighbor of Salah, a Fatah al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades operative, suggested to Salah to join the group. Salah agreed, and from then on the recruiter met with him daily for an evening walk, during which the operative frequently talked about suicide attacks against Israel. Later the operative arranged a meeting between Salah and a senior commander in the organization, who asked him whether he would agree to carry out an operation inside Israel. Salah agreed but said that he had no experience in using firearms. The commander then suggested carrying out a suicide attack. Salah refused, saying that he did not want to die. After the meeting, the recruiter told him that if he would carry out a suicide attack, the group would give his family $25,000. Salah said he would consider the offer, but the recruiter interpreted his response as consent. A few days later he told Salah that the organization wanted to launch the operation. Although Salah answered he was not ready yet, he was invited to meet with several operatives who asked him again to carry out a suicide attack. He said he agreed in principle, but was not yet ready to do it. Several more meetings took place before Salah said that he was ready. By his account, he finally decided to undertake the mission after sitting alone in the mosque, meditating, and reading Qur'anic verses on martyrdom. Not surprisingly, in the psychological tests Salah was assessed as having a dependent personality. His case demonstrates how a person essentially reluctant to carry out a suicide action agreed nevertheless because he found it hard to turn down the requests of those whom he perceived as authority figures. He enjoyed and was flattered by his relationship with the recruiter and felt obligated to comply with his wishes.

Some of those who agreed to carry out a suicide attack were initially reluctant but found it hard to refuse, as they felt that turning down the request would mark them as cowards or at least as unpatriotic. Majed was an 18-year-old youngster of a well-to-do family in a West Bank town. Majed described his family as religious but not fanatic. None of the immediate family members was involved in militant activity. He was a good student in high school and after graduating he decided on academic studies abroad. While in the process of preparing the paperwork for traveling, he was approached by A.B., a commander of *Izz ad-Din al-Qassam* (Hamas military arm) in his town, whom he knew slightly, who asked him to join the organization and carry out a suicide attack. In the interview Majed said that he had not liked the idea, but "did not know how to say no. I was confused because of our previous acquaintance and I did not know how to avoid him. I was stressed and thought a lot about how to refuse his request." He therefore agreed, hoping that the suicide mission would not be implemented before he would leave town to study abroad, and then he would be off the hook. A.B., however, moved fast. Two weeks later he sent Majed on a reconnaissance trip on the road to Jerusalem, where his eventual suicide attack was supposed to take place. A few days later, another member of the cell carried out a suicide attack in Jerusalem. Majed was told that he would be next in line. He was videotaped reading his will (prepared by A.B.) and was informed that he would be dispatched for his suicide attack within two days, but he was arrested on the next day.

Contrary to the would-be suicides' reports, most organizers insisted that all the recruits for suicide attacks offered themselves on their own initiative and that the organization did not actively seek candidates for suicide attacks. Only 25% of the organizers who answered this question, who belonged to all three organizations, admitted that some candidates, albeit a minority, were recruited by the group. These claims contradict the data of the would-be suicides' study, which showed that 47% of the participants had been approached by a group operative and asked to undertake a suicide mission. Furthermore, an analysis of the indictments and verdicts of 61 candidates recruited by the organizers in this study, which include descriptions of their terrorist activity, reveals that in 35 cases with a clearly identified recruitment process, 54% of the candidates volunteered on their own initiative and 46% were solicited by an organization's recruiter. This ratio is almost identical to the would-be suicides' account and is much higher than the organizers' description. Presumably, the organizers' responses on this issue were influenced by their wish not to be seen as manipulators of naïve youngsters. The disparity may also be related to the interpretation of the terms "solicited" and "volunteered." In their search for prospective suicide bombers the recruiters may have approached youngsters known in the community to have expressed willingness for "martyrdom" operations (whether or not they truly meant it). From the recruiter's viewpoint he was approaching a "volunteer," whereas the candidate himself felt he had been solicited, since the recruiter had initiated contact. In any event, claims of a much higher number of willing candidates than the availability of suicide belts are apparently untrue. In many cases the organizers actively sought out candidates for suicide attacks and met with several refusals before they found willing youngsters. The following case illustrates the difficulties in recruiting candidates.

Amjad, a Fatah organizer, obtained an explosive belt but needed a suicide. He approached a candidate who, he had heard, was willing to carry out a suicide attack. At their meeting, the candidate agreed, but asked to say farewell to his

parents. He went home and never returned. In an attempt to find a replacement, one of Amjad's recruiters located a youngster who expressed willingness to carry out a suicide attack. The organizer met him, and the youngster agreed but wanted to think more about it. Later that night he called the organizer and said that he had changed his mind but would try to find a replacement. Several hours later he called again, saying that he could not find a replacement and therefore would do it himself, but only after his sick mother would recover. After consultations the organizer decided that the candidate was unreliable and severed contact with him.

The Organizers' Unwillingness to Carry Out a Suicide Operation

A salient difference between the organizers and the would-be suicides was in the formers' unwillingness to carry out a suicide attack themselves. Nine organizers said frankly that they were reluctant to kill themselves in a "martyrdom" attack. Awad (PIJ) replied: "No. It's very difficult. Every man has different character and traits. I was destined to organize [suicide attacks] and others were destined to perform martyrdom operations. I am willing to fight but not to die in a suicide attack. For me life is something basic." Another Hamas organizer, Yasser, said: "I wouldn't be willing to carry out a martyrdom operation. Every one has his role; I was an organizer and another's role was to carry out a martyrdom attack." Presumably, the recognition that one is sending others to make the utmost sacrifice while being reluctant to do it oneself must generate great psychological distress, unless the person in question is utterly cynical and manipulative. Yet the organizers displayed no signs of mental torment about this issue. None expressed remorse or sorrow over either the innocent victims of the attacks or the youngsters they had sent to die in the process. Most of those who claimed to be unwilling to carry out a suicide attack personally solved the problem merely on a cognitive level. Taher (PIJ) said: "I wasn't ready to do it myself. I sent others because they wanted to do it; I didn't persuade them to do it." Others maintained that they were also in danger of death by Israeli forces, ignoring the difference between living in risk of being killed by the enemy and the certain self-inflicted death of the youngsters they had sent. Fares (PIJ) said in this vein: "No. I didn't want go on a martyrdom operation. I was constantly exposed to death by the Israelis and I was living on borrowed time, but the thought of being a martyr didn't cross my mind. Dying by Israeli soldiers or in a martyrdom operation is the same; I'd be a *shahid* anyway." A recurrent theme in the explanations was that their role as organizers was more important than carrying out a suicide attack. Thus, Ra'ed (Fatah) said: "I didn't want to do it myself. I thought I could contribute more as a cell leader. In this role I could also be killed." One organizer (Kamal, Fatah) hinted to the emotional pressure that plagued him despite his rationalization. By his testimony, initially he did not want to carry out a suicide attack himself, but following complaints from families of youngsters he had sent to their death, he decided to carry out an attack himself, but was arrested before he could implement his decision.

The five organizers who stated they were willing, in principle, to go on a suicide attack, justified their abstention with their more important roles as commanders. Amar (Hamas) said: "I was ready, but I was not asked to do it. My role was to make explosive charges." (In an answer to a question he said that he had not offered himself as a suicide bomber.) Hassan (PIJ) and Na'if (Hamas) gave similar responses.

The organizers were also asked whether they would be willing to send a family member on a suicide attack. Two declined to answer, and of the remaining 12, seven

said they would be willing to do it, and one evaded the question, saying that it was not a matter of sending a family member, as there had already been a suicide bomber from his village and, this, he thought, was enough for one village. Mustafa, who admitted that he was not ready to do it himself, answered with regard to sending a family member: "I have no problem with that; my ideological background accepts it. There is no discrimination between myself and others; it is justified until the occupation is over." Four organizers said they would not send a family member. Isma'il (PIJ) explained that he would not be able to act against the special emotional bonds with his family.

Actually, in some of all Palestinian suicide attacks (not merely those prepared or executed by the participants of the studies reported here) organizers did send suicides from their extended family or clan (*hamula*), but rarely did they send a close family member, and in only one case did an organizer send his younger brother on such a mission. In this exceptional instance, the younger brother volunteered on his own initiative, presumably motivated by the wish to live (or rather die) up to the expectations of his admired brother. The older brother made the explosive belt, put it on his younger brother, and participated in the will-reading ritual. The brother was sent to explode in Haifa but, having reached his target, was overcome by fear and aborted the mission on the pretext that the explosive charge failed to detonate.[4]

Despite the organizers' explicit unwillingness to kill themselves for the cause, their insurgent activity clearly exacted from them a high personal price they readily accepted. Asked whether they would continue their activity even if their families suffered as a result, all said that they would. Four noted that their families' homes had actually been demolished.

The Candidates' Self-Reported Motivation

Several questions in the interviews addressed the motivation to carry out a suicide attack. The participants were asked what were their own motives for undertaking the mission, and what, in their view, were those of other Palestinians who had carried out suicide attacks. Following an open ended question on the motivation for suicide attacks, they were asked to assess the influence of several possible motives including the occupation, revenge for personal loss or suffering, religious belief, the wish to go to paradise, economic benefits to the family, and mental condition (being tired of life). Regarding other suicides' motives, some participants said that everyone has his own reasons for agreeing to carry out a suicide mission; most, however, attributed their own motives to others as well. Table 2 summarizes the suicides' descriptions of their own motives.

All participants mentioned more than one motive, indicating that the decision to undertake a suicide mission is a result of accumulation and/or interaction of several factors. Still, a dominant, more emphatically expressed motive that overshadowed the others, could be discerned in the answers of most would-be suicides.

The Organizers' Views of the Recruits

The organizers' preferences for suicide candidates' characteristics were primarily dictated by operational considerations but also reflected social awareness.

All organizers preferred young recruits, although there were differences regarding the exact age group. Some organizers preferred 17–18-year-old youngsters, since

Table 2. The would-be suicides' self-described motives

Motives	Very high	High	Low	Very low
Nationalistic (occupation)	9	2		1
Personal revenge	5	2	2	3
Religious	5	1	1	2
Paradise	7	2		2
Economic gain	3			5
Glory/fame	1			1
Previous shahids	4		3	2
Mental condition (wish to die)	4			

they are more eager and unencumbered by family obligations, whereas others preferred people in their 20s, because they are more mature. Only three organizers mentioned a minimum age—15 or 17 years.

The organizers expressed clear preference for unmarried candidates. Almost all also noted that they would not recruit an only son or a youngster whose family had already lost a member in the struggle. Half of the organizers claimed that they would not recruit a man who is the main provider for his family. These limitations may stem from the assumption that those concerned about their family are more likely to abort the mission, but also from moral considerations and the wish to maintain an ethical image in the community.

In their description of the social background and motives of the prospective suicides, most organizers stated that the candidates came from all social strata. Four of them, representing all three groups, said that most suicides were poor, simple, and unsophisticated, mainly refugee camp dwellers, although some came from well-to-do families. This description does not quite fit the findings of the would-be suicides' study, but, interestingly, it was the perception of some of the organizers.

Asked about the recruits' desirable characteristics, six organizers (two of them Fatah members) mentioned religious belief as an important requirement. The candidate should be "determined, ready to sacrifice himself for Allah, the religious element is predominant" (Mustafa, a Hamas member); "The shahid must be religious, willing to sacrifice himself" (Ra'ed, a Fatah member); "First and foremost—a firm belief in paradise, conviction in the Palestinian national struggle and in the need to fight the occupation" (Atallah, a Hamas member). An equal number of organizers gave primacy to nationalist motivation, some of them connecting it with religious commitment. A Hamas organizer, Na'if, said: "The promise of paradise and the belief that the *shahid* will get there is very important, but it is not enough in itself. There must be a strong nationalist motivation and belief in the need to act against the occupation." Another Hamas organizer (Yasser) expressed an interesting opinion: "The true motivation of the candidates is nationalist. Nationalism is the essential motivation. There is no religious reason that in itself drives a man to carry out a suicide operation. Religion reinforces and helps the nationalist motivation. It is a political drive with religious backing." This observation is congruent with the would-be suicides' descriptions of their motivation for undertaking a suicide mission. Almost all organizers agreed with this assessment. Asked what prompted Palestinian youth to volunteer for suicide

missions, all mentioned Israeli actions during the intifada as the main cause. Religious belief was brought up only by some as an additional factor. Only two organizers (Hamas and PIJ) viewed paradise and "love of martyrdom" as the primary cause. Ra'ed's description was typical: "The feeling of confinement, the killing, all these inflame hatred and contribute to the willingness to volunteer [for suicide action]."

Several organizers emphasized characteristics that facilitate the suicide's ability to pass Israeli security checkpoints and reach the target undetected: "The candidate should be serious and mature, with the looks and behavior that would enable him to get into Israel" (Isma'il, a PIJ member).

Security considerations and the need to avoid detection by Israeli intelligence had an important role in selecting the candidates. In this regard, almost all organizers viewed previous membership in the organization as a disadvantage. Taher (PIJ), for example, said: "We prefer a man who had not been involved in resistance activity, someone who lives in a place far from the organizer and the recruiter, so that the connection between them would not be discovered." Similarly, Ra'ed (Fatah) said: "Usually, the *istishhadeen* [martyrs] are not members of the organization because the security forces know those who are members and this may jeopardize the operation." And Kamal (Fatah): "It's better if the candidate is not a member of the organization and unknown to the Israeli authorities, so that he can pass the roadblocks smoothly." Two organizers, however, thought that previous membership in the organization was desirable. Mustafa (Hamas), for example, said: "It's better if they have a background of membership in the organization; it shows that they have high [ideological] awareness."

The organizers were also asked about reasons for rejecting a candidate. Aside from the family conditions mentioned above, most organizers said they would not take mentally unstable candidates, suicidal people who want to die for personal reasons, and criminals. Five organizers said they would not recruit a hesitant candidate. Three organizers—one of each organization—said they would not recruit a woman for a suicide mission.

Reinforcing the Candidate's Commitment

For security reasons, candidates for suicide attacks were prepared individually, even for joint attacks.

Only one organizer (Hassan, PIJ) said that some meetings with the candidate were designed to prepare him mentally for his mission. The discussion focused on religious issues, on previous *shahids*, their qualities, the respect they earned after their death and their high status in paradise, as well as on the esteem and treatment the organization and the community would lavish on the candidate's family. All other organizers claimed it was unnecessary to boost the candidates' motivation, as they were already highly motivated when they volunteered for the mission. This assessment of the candidates' mental readiness does not quite tally with reality. In fact, an analysis of these organizers' indictments revealed that 36% of 61 suicides prepared by them aborted the mission. Nor does this assessment correspond to the data of the would-be suicides' study, which showed a high rate of hesitation among them. Yet the organizers' reports on the absence of meetings for mental preparation seem to genuinely reflect the situation during the second intifada, when most organizers did not invest much time and effort in the mental preparation of candidates. Afraid

to be detected by Israeli intelligence agencies, they tried, as a rule, to make the preparation period as short as possible and, therefore, kept the number of meetings to the bare minimum (usually two or three), devoting them primarily to operational instructions. The organizers invariably claimed that the candidates met only those involved in the operational preparation, rather than people from the religious or political echelon. Even in this time-pressured, operation-oriented preparation, it is clear that at least some organizers felt the need to reassure—if not convince—the candidate and to alleviate his concerns. These talks were presumably held during the recruitment phase and interwoven with the operational preparations. Apparently, the candidates were deeply concerned about their families' condition after their death, particularly about the expected demolition of their families' homes. Almost all organizers said the candidates were promised that the organization would rebuild their homes, and provided examples of suicides whose families had been taken care of.

Attitude Toward Hesitant Candidates

All organizers said that hesitant candidates were nonexistent or very rare. This observation does not tally with the would-be suicides' self-descriptions (66.7% said that they hesitated even after they had volunteered or agreed to undertake the mission) and the analysis of the organizers' indictments and verdicts, which, as noted above, showed that more than one-third of the candidates abandoned the mission. This disparity may be attributed to the organizers' reluctance to be perceived as convincing hesitant youngsters to commit suicide. Still, in many cases the organizers may have been truly unaware of the candidates' hesitations, as the latter presented a heroic façade in their meetings with the locally revered leaders who had invited them to join the struggle.

All but one organizer claimed they were opposed to convincing hesitant candidates on the grounds that those who hesitate were unreliable and likely to jeopardize the operation. A Hamas organizer (Atallah) added that it was impossible to convince people to kill themselves if they are not ready to do it. Only one organizer (Yasser, Hamas) said he had tried to persuade wavering candidates. Yet despite the organizers' claims, at least some candidates must have expressed conflict and uncertainty, and the organizers therefore tried to alleviate their concerns and bolster their determination. This assessment is buttressed by the organizers' description of how they handled the candidates' worries about the possible demolition of their families' homes by the IDF in retaliation for their attack. Most organizers said the candidates were assured that the organization would help their families to rebuild their house.

The organizers were concerned about the candidates' families' attitudes before but less after completion of the operation. Of ten organizers who answered the question how they would handle family opposition to their sons' intended suicide mission, eight said categorically that the operation must be cancelled immediately if the suicide's family learns about it, as the family would try to prevent it at any cost, also by contacting the PNA or even the Israeli authorities. All the organizers maintained they had made no attempt to persuade the families, as they believed such attempts to be futile. Azam (Fatah) thought that the mothers were the pivot of family opposition, and thought that a mother who supported her son's suicide was insane. The organizers did not seem emotionally bothered about sending

youngsters to their sure death against their families' will; their only concern was operational success.

The Will

The practice of videotaping a candidate for a suicide attack dates back to the pro-Syrian Lebanese groups in the mid-1980s. Palestinian groups have used this practice ever since they started the suicide attacks campaign in 1993. In this ritual the candidate was videotaped reading a last statement, holding a weapon in one hand and the Qur'an in the other, against the backdrop of the organization's flags, posters, and slogans. The videotape is usually released to the media immediately after the operation.

All the organizers viewed the videotaping first and foremost as propaganda, intended for the Palestinian audience (an example to follow), for the Israeli audience (to spread fear), and the world at large (a show of Palestinian desperation and determination). Atallah (Hamas) provided a comprehensive description of the purpose: "Every insurgent movement needs to communicate its message to the enemy and to the insurgent community. The aim is to influence both the enemy and the people, to encourage others to follow suit and to deter the enemy, to publicize in the world the Palestinian problem and the reasons for the operation. With regard to the enemy, it is intended to deter and demonstrate that the Palestinians are willing to sacrifice their lives for their freedom." Several organizers mentioned additional purposes of the videotape: to publicize the perpetrating organization and to commemorate the suicide. Five organizers said that the videotaping ritual strengthens the candidate's motivation and constitutes a point of no return: "The videotaping is actually a contract between the candidate and the organizer" (Na'if, Hamas); "The videotaped reading of the testament creates a situation of commitment to complete [the mission]. There is no way back!" (Azam, Fatah).

Most organizers claimed that the candidate is involved in writing the testament; only a few said that it is dictated by the organization (the groups did not differ in this regard). This claim contradicts the would-be suicides' testimonies, all of whom but one said that their testaments had been written by the organizers. As in other cases, the organizers' version may have been prompted by the wish to underscore the candidates' role in the process, so as not to be perceived as manipulators of unsophisticated youngsters.

As the last act of securing the candidate's commitment, the testament ritual is performed very close to dispatching the candidate on his mission. Almost all organizers said that the videotaping was usually done the day before the candidate was dispatched and sometimes on that very day. These reports are congruent with the would-be suicides' accounts.

Most organizers were aware of cases in which the candidate refused to be videotaped, and some met with personal refusals. Three organizers explained such refusals as a sign of modesty—reluctance to be regarded as someone seeking fame—and one thought that in the case he had encountered the refusal stemmed from lack of resolve, because the candidate perceived the videotaping ritual as an irrevocable commitment (Kamal, Fatah). All but one organizer said that although the videotaping served the organization's interest, the ritual is not a must. Often, those who refuse to be videotaped agree to be filmed by a stills camera.

Operational Decisions and Instructions

Selecting the Target

The city to be attacked was almost always selected by the organizer, with the precise location often left to the suicide's discretion, although in several cases it was pre-determined before dispatching him, especially when he or the guide assigned to bring him to the location of the attack was familiar with the city. The suicides were usually instructed to explode in a crowded place and aim at killing as many people as possible. Most organizers—12 out of 14—openly admitted that the suicides were instructed to kill civilians at random. Amar (Hamas) for example, described the target as "a crowded place, congested with people, [so as to cause] a maximum number of casualties." Some organizers, however, paid lip service to moral considerations, stating that the first preference was to attack military targets, civilians being a second choice. Only two organizers, both Fatah members, described the choice of targets using patently false propaganda, namely, that the selected targets were military or violent settlers who shoot at Palestinians. Yet both organizers were responsible for suicide attacks against random civilians in Israeli cities. All organizers said that accessibility was a primary consideration in selecting the target. Kamal (Fatah) tersely summed up the selection criteria as "capabilities and accessibility," Taher (PIJ) described them as "an easy target, ability to reach it," and Atallah (Hamas) said "first and foremost—operational considerations and accessibility." None mentioned moral constraints.

Instructions Concerning Behavior on the Way to the Target

Problems on the way to the target were commonplace: sudden curfews, roadblocks, military patrols, and—more often than could be expected—mechanical failure of the car. At the border, where the suicide usually was to meet an Israeli taxi driver, the latter sometimes failed to show up. In the interviews the organizers invariably said that in case the suicide could not reach his target he should return to base and wait for another opportunity. Yet if he was already within Israel, he was expected to choose another target and explode. The same rule applied to cases in which the suicide was stopped by security forces and could not escape. In this event, he was expected to explode rather than surrender. Three organizers said that the suicide should explode himself even if he can escape. A different potential problem, however, involved the suicide's increasing hesitation after his dispatch. All the organizers maintained that in this eventuality the suicide should return home. Hesitant suicides who aborted the mission are not punished but are not sent again, as they are assumed to be unreliable and a security risk.

The organizers were, of course, aware of the highly probable interferences on the suicides' way to the target. Most did not want to leave the decisions entirely to the suicides and therefore saw fit to retain communication with them via cellular phone after dispatching. Only three said that after dispatching they avoided all communication with the suicide. Aware of the security risk involved in communicating with the suicides, the organizers tried to minimize it in various ways, including the use of code words and hints, equipping the suicides with previously unused telephones and forbidding communication after the suicide crossed the border. Two organizers, however, said that they had instructed the suicide (or the guide) to call the last minute before the attack, assuming that the risk of exposure at this time is unimportant.

Growing Fear on the Way to the Target

The would-be suicides' accounts showed clearly that fear and hesitation climaxed after the candidate was dispatched, when he was already on his way to the target. Rafik described the progressive change in his feelings as follows:

Q: What did you feel on the day of execution?
A: Initially, very strong determination. But half-way my nerves grew weaker. My thoughts started going astray.
Q: What did you think would happen?
A: I thought of many things. My family, friends. When you hesitate Satan is at work, and if you succeed in overcoming Satan and continue the operation, you'll be received [admitted] by god.
Q: Do you mean Satan got in?
A: Satan got in and didn't get out. I hesitated at the last moment.
Q: So you're saying that you did have the intention?
A: I had the intention but there was fear, Satan, and I didn't have enough time to prepare myself, only a month, whereas a *shahid* needs at least two or three months to prepare himself.
Q: What happened that made you change your mind?
A: On that day I was in shock and decided to go back. I was caught on the way back.

It should be noted that Rafik volunteered to carry out a suicide attack on his own initiative, insisted that his intention was firm, and kept pressing his superior in the group to be sent on the mission. As time went by and he was not sent, he threatened to contact another group if the organization did not send him soon.

Rafik's operation was planned as a double suicide attack. His partner in the mission, Ali, described a similarly progressive fear on the way to the target. He too had volunteered on his own initiative and said he had felt determined throughout the preparations. "Even in the morning of the operation I was very brave in my mind." But he started hesitating "from the minute I put on the explosive belt." "I thought how frightening the belt was, that I was going to explode into pieces. I was thinking of my family and friends, *but the situation was stronger than me*" (emphasis added). This feeling of commitment—"the situation"—kept him going for a while, but "the more I kept going, the more I hesitated."

Ramzi also said he had started hesitating on the way to the target, when he reached the Israeli border. He remembered his mother (his father had died when he was four years old) and thought how she would grieve if he died. Furthermore he was troubled by the thought that his family's home might be demolished in retaliation for his operation. He decided to abort the mission when he and his guide, who was to get him to the target, arrived at an Israeli Arab village on the border. There they looked for a taxi to take them to Tel Aviv, where the attack was supposed to take place, but they couldn't find any and had to wait. It was at that point that Ramzi decided to return home. He needed this breathing spell, this lapse in the pace of events to start rowing against the strong current that had been carrying him since his initial consent to become a *shahid*. Had he and his guide immediately found a taxi to take them to Tel Aviv, Ramzi might have continued on his deadly mission to the very end.

Another interesting interruption in the process, which resulted in the candidates' decision to call off the mission, was told by Jamal, who was to carry out a double suicide attack in an Israeli city. A guide brought the two prospective attackers to a mosque in a West Bank Arab village bordering with Israel, where they were supposed to disguise themselves as Druze clerics, put on the explosive belts, and find a taxi to take them to their target. At the mosque, however, they were told that the Israeli army had imposed a curfew and they had better hide as long as it lasted. While waiting in the mosque, they started talking to each other and decided to abort the mission. Jamal described the change of heart as follows:

> Initially, before we set out, I thought of nothing except the operation itself, how I wanted to do it. I focused only on the way I was going to do it [and thought of] nothing else. I and my partner didn't talk much to each other, we just got acquainted. In the village mosque we started talking and reached the conclusion that we wanted to abandon the operation, mainly because of our fear and the concern about our families. I started thinking about my life and my future. We called N.J. [the Hamas organizer of the attack] and told him that we wanted to return. He asked us to go on but I told him that we wanted to leave the mission altogether and he accepted our decision. The reason for our decision was that we got frightened at the execution phase. My fear got stronger and stronger. I was not 100 percent firm and convinced.

Is there a point of no return?[5] In earlier writings on the subject (e.g., Merari, 2000; Merari, 2005), the videotaping ritual was described as such. Yet the newer data presented here show that while the videotaping may, indeed, reinforce commitment, in a significant number of cases it does not diminish fear, which presumably increases—at least in some candidates—all the way to the target. In fact, a few candidates reached the target and only there, at the last moment, refrained from pressing the switch. One such case was R.M., who had been sent by Mustafa (Hamas). R.M. was initially scheduled to participate in a double attack with his cousin. He consented but later changed his mind on the pretext that his sister was in the United States, and he wanted to wait for her return before going on the mission. The cousin therefore carried out the suicide mission alone, exploding on a bus in Tel Aviv. The death of his cousin may well have left R.M. with feelings of guilt; it may have also shamed him socially. He therefore agreed to carry out another suicide attack, despite his fear. He was hastily instructed on how to operate an explosive belt, videotaped, and dispatched on the same day. The organizer instructed him that should he be stopped at a security roadblock, he must immediately explode the charge, even if his escort, a Hamas operative, would be killed too, as a result. He was driven by the escort to the target, a restaurant in Tel Aviv, where the escort left him on his own. R.M. approached the restaurant but at the door was stopped by a security guard who suspected him. Ignoring his instructions, R.M. turned and ran away but was caught soon. Would R.M. have set off the charge on his body had he not been stopped at the restaurant door? Possibly, but we cannot be sure. At this moment of extreme conflict a very thin line presumably separated dying from surviving, and any external stimulus could have made the difference.

However, in some hesitating candidates there may be a moment of reconciliation with the mission, after which they manage to quell their fear, so that the avoidance

gradient ceases to rise at some point along the way. The case of the would-be suicide Nabil suggests that this process may indeed occur in some suicides. Nabil, who said that he had been afraid all the way described himself as entering an altered state of consciousness when he boarded the bus on which he tried to explode.

At the other end of the motivation continuum were a number of suicides eager to explode as soon as possible. One suicide sent by Isma'il, for example, volunteered on his own initiative, was videotaped and dispatched to carry out an attack inside Israel. He did not make an effort to look for a crowded place; instead, he entered a home on the outskirts of a small village and exploded, killing a 65-year-old woman and wounding her three grandchildren. Another suicide, also a volunteer, was sent by the same organizer to carry out a suicide attack in an Israeli city. On his way he arrived at an Israeli village on the border early in the morning, entered a grocery store and exploded, killing the 63-year-old shop owner who was there alone. In the absence of psychological data on these suicides it is impossible to determine what their mental condition was at that time. Nevertheless, their behavior suggests that they first and foremost sought their own death.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper are based mainly on the participants' answers in the interviews, especially those of the organizers of suicide attacks. How reliable were these answers? In general, the participants' frankness was impressive. Many, albeit not all, details in their answers on the preparations for suicide attacks could be checked against and tallied well with the descriptions of their activity in the indictments. The organizers also answered candidly some questions that may have threatened their self-perception and projected image, in particular the question on their willingness to carry out a suicide attack. Their sweeping admission of their reluctance to do it themselves presented them in an unflattering light but attested to their candor. Digressions from the truth were related mainly to issues that challenged their moral integrity. They denied, for example, the practice of convincing youngsters to carry out "martyrdom operations." In this regard, the testimonies of the would-be suicides and the analysis of the indictments provide a more accurate picture.

The organizers' accounts did not reveal systematic differences between the groups with regard to policies and methods of recruitment, preparations for the suicide attack, target selection, and instructions for conduct on the way to the target. Even in areas that should, conceivably, reflect the groups' diversity, such as attitude to religion, which could affect the selection of candidates and their mental preparation, the variance within the groups was greater than between the groups. This surprising finding may attest to the decentralized management of suicide attacks even in the politically centralized Hamas and PIJ. Variations in management style (e.g., the degree of centralization and personal involvement in details) stemmed from individual differences between the organizers rather than from their organizational affiliation. Hence no "Hamas style" or "Fatah style" of organizing a suicide attack. The organizers faced the same problems and difficulties, such as candidates' hesitation, family opposition, and interruptions on the way to the target, and tailored their solutions according to their personal leadership abilities. The differences in the rate of success between the groups and between organizers within each group may be due to factors that were not detected in the interviews. Thus, although all the organizers

explicitly viewed the candidates' motivation as a crucial factor, some were presumably better judges of character than others. Similarly, even though all the organizers were aware of the need for strict secrecy about the preparations, their conduct presumably varied. The fact that Hamas organizers were better educated than those of the other two groups may be somehow related to these differences.[6]

Suicide as a solution for personal problems is forbidden in Islam. The term commonly used in Palestinian society for what is generally known today in most parts of the world as "suicide attacks" is *amaliyat istishhadiyya* (martyrdom operations), and this was the term used by the interviewees in this study. The organizers of the suicide attacks and most of the would-be suicides interviewed in this study regarded the suicide operations as acts motivated by the interests of their community and religion, rather than by personal needs. Yet, human motivation and behavior is always more complex than ideological statements.

There is an obvious disparity between the organizers' rules of rejecting unsuitable candidates and the actual characteristics of at least some of the would-be suicides, as revealed in their own testimonies. The disparity has to do with both the firmness of commitment of candidates and with the motivation of some of them.

There is no reason to disbelieve the organizers' statements that they tried to sift out hesitating candidates, as the latter obviously jeopardized the success of the mission. In practice, however, they were unable to detect the fact that many candidates did hesitate. As mentioned above, two-thirds of the would-be suicides said in the interviews that they hesitated (although some of them did everything in their power to complete the mission despite their hesitation). Presumably, the organizers failed to detect these candidates' hesitation because the candidates refrained from admitting it in the few meetings they had with the organizers, for fear of being regarded as weaklings. In addition, hesitation and fear tended to grow sharply in the very last day before the implementation of the mission. Thus, presumably, many of the candidates who eventually felt intense fear did not feel this way at the time of recruitment and during most of the preparation phase.

The other point of disparity pertains to the question of suicidality. Whereas most of the organizers asserted that they would not recruit a suicidal candidate, the psychological examination of the would-be suicides revealed that a significant minority (40%) of the candidates tested had some suicidal tendencies. In most cases, these tendencies were sub-clinical and the candidates themselves were, perhaps, unaware of them. In at least two cases, however, suicidal ideation was expressed clearly by the candidates. Still, it is highly likely that even the candidates whose primary motivation for undertaking the mission was their wish to die did not share these sentiments with the organizers, for fear that they would be rejected. In this respect, the study's interviews and psychological tests provided tools for assessing the would-be suicides' state of mind that the organizers did not have.

Notes

1. Martin Kramer, "Sacrifice and 'Self-Martyrdom' in Shi'ite Lebanon," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 3 (1991), 30–47 (p.34).

2. In the interviews with the would-be suicide bombers and organizers of suicide attacks we used the Arabic term *amaliyya istishhadiyya* (martyrdom operation) to denote a suicide attack. This is the term commonly used by Palestinians for these attacks.

3. Throughout the paper we use fictional names for the study's participants, so as to protect their identity.

4. With regard to foreigners who volunteered to join al-Qaeda in Iraq, Felter and Fishman found a connection between the agent of recruitment and the willingness to become a suicide bomber. By their findings, the rate of volunteers for suicide missions was high among those recruited by an acquaintance, a neighbor, an organization activist, or through the internet (ranging from 57.8% to 100%), but relatively low among those recruited by a family member (18.2%). See: Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, "Becoming a foreign fighter: A *second* look at the Sinjar records," in: Brian Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts, & Bleedout: Al-Qaida's Road in and Out of Iraq* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008). Available at: http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/pdf/Sinjar_2_July_23.pdf.

5. Lester and Lester commented wisely: "Death is a gradual process and no one moment can be identified as the time when it occurs. From the viewpoint of suicidology, the question of when physical death occurs is less important than the individual's subjective experience of death. He may consider himself 'as good as dead' when his body is still functioning, or he may expect his consciousness and awareness to continue beyond bodily death." See: Gene Lester and David Lester, *Suicide: The Gamble with Death* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), p.23.

6. Benmelech and Berrebi found that the education level of Palestinian suicide bombers during the second intifada was positively correlated with several criteria of success in their suicide mission. See: Ephraim Benmelech and Claude Berrebi, "Human Capital and the Productivity of Suicide Bombers," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21, no. 3 (2007), 223–238.