

# Suicide Bombers in Israel: Their Motivations, Characteristics, and Prior Activity in Terrorist Organizations

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# Suicide Bombers in Israel: Their Motivations, Characteristics, and Prior Activity in Terrorist Organizations

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This paper examines the characteristics of suicide bombers as reflected in the Israeli press during the Second Intifada in Israel. The analysis aims to determine whether there were significant differences in the characteristics of suicide bombers with religious motives versus those with nationalist motives. The findings reveal that gender, education level, and organizational affiliation correlated significantly with motives for carrying out suicide attacks. Most of the suicide bombers with religious motives were men with elementary education. In addition, the results show that most of the suicide bombers who were affiliated with the Hamas organization acted out of religious motives. No significant differences were found between suicide bombers with religious and those with nationalist motives with regard to age, marital status, and prior activity in terrorist organizations.

## 1. Literature Review

### 1.1. Suicide Bombers

Suicide bombers pose one of the most extreme criminological problems that the international community has encountered in the contemporary era. Suicide bombings and other terrorist acts that cause high numbers of casualties are a form of psychological warfare (Crenshaw 2000). Essentially, one of the main goals of terrorist organizations is to frighten people through acts of random brutality and violence, in an attempt to gain extensive publicity about their goals (Ganor 2000). Suicide bombings upset the social framework that members of a society depend on and trust. No one is sure of the behavior that can be expected of others, and levels of trust are reduced as individuals turn inward and concentrate on their own survival (Crenshaw 2000). Therefore, suicide bombers have an immense impact on the public due to the overwhelming sense of helplessness that ensues following the attack (Sprinzak 2000).

Over the last two decades, Islamic fundamentalist groups have sponsored human bombings in Israel as well as in other countries such as Afghanistan, Argentina, Chechnya, Croatia, Kashmir, Kenya, Lebanon, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Tanzania. The targets have ranged from ordinary

people to world leaders, including an attempt to assassinate the Pope in Manila in 1995 (Nasra 2001). Most suicide attacks are executed by activating explosives, which are carried on the terrorist's body in the form of a portable explosive device, or are planted in a vehicle driven by the terrorist (Ganor 2000). Thus, the suicide bomber essentially becomes a human bomb, and selects the time, place, and circumstances for activating the explosive device in an attempt to cause maximum damage to the target (Schweitzer 2001). For terrorist organizations, human bomb attacks are one of the surest ways of hitting a target. The human bomb is a simple and low-cost operation, and the main objective is to guarantee that the enemy will be traumatized. With an explosive belt or bag, the bomber has control over the target, location, and timing (Nasra 2001). In addition, there is no risk that interrogated terrorists will surrender important information, because their deaths are certain (Sprinzak 2000). Suicide is a forbidden act according to the Islamic religion – but during a holy war it is an acceptable act, which is defined as self-sacrifice in the service of Allah – *istashahad* rather than suicide (Nasra 2001). According to the Muslim religion, the *shahid* is a person who dies a martyr's death – a warrior who sacrifices his own life for the glory of Allah. Most of the suicide bombings in

different parts of the world were carried out by members of religious organizations such as Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad (Shay and Schweitzer 2002).

### 1.2. Suicide Bombers in Israel

The first time a Palestinian organization initiated a suicide bombing against an Israeli target was in April 1993 in the West Bank, which is Israeli occupied territory (Schweitzer 2001). Between 1993 and the second Intifada in 2000, thirty-seven suicide bombers exploded in Israel. Most of them were identified as members of the Hamas organization, and a small proportion were identified as members of Islamic Jihad (Nasra 2001).

The term *Intifada* has been used by the Palestinians in reference to their violent rebellion against continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which were captured by Israel in the Six Day War of 1967. Since the establishment of the state of Israel, there have been two Intifadas. The first one lasted for about five years, from 1987 to 1993, while the second one, which began in September 2000, is still ongoing. This study refers specifically to the second Intifada.

Since the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000, 164 human bombs have exploded in Israel. Most of the terrorists were men, but a minority were women. In addition, 450 terrorists were arrested on their way to commit a suicide bombing (Israeli Intelligence and Terrorism Center 2006). Most of the suicide attacks in Israel have taken place in shopping malls, on buses, at street corners, and in places where people congregate.

There are two main hypotheses regarding the motives of suicide bombers in Palestinian society. The first is the religious approach, which argues that belief in Islam is the main motive for terrorism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Religious suicide bombers believe that Allah selects the martyrs, and that the only aim of the suicide attack is to win Allah's satisfaction. In addition, religious suicide bombers perceive a lofty and glorious place for themselves in the spiritual and mystical realm beyond life on earth (Nasra 2001). Ganor (2000) emphasizes that in most cases the suicide bomber has a strong religious affiliation, and that the religious sentiments are skillfully manipulated

in order to persuade him to take part in the terrorist operation. Thus, it is not surprising that many bombers are recruited in mosques and in religious schools (Nasra, 2001). Islamic terrorist organizations prepare suicide bombers and strengthen their commitment by focusing attention on paradise, on being in the presence of Allah, and on meeting the Prophet Muhammad (Telhami 2002). Moreover, most of the suicide bombers were educated in religious schools and practiced Islam in their everyday lives (Ganor 2000; Merari 1990; Schweitzer 2001).

The second motive is political/national, and highlights the political situation as the main reason for suicide attacks (Stern 2003). According to this approach, the main cause for suicide bombing is collective rage, hopelessness, and despair within Palestinian society on the national-political level. In this climate, suicide bombings occur because they help individuals escape desperation without having to rely on the Israeli and Palestinian governments to release them from their plight (Telhami 2002). Previous studies have noted that during the second Intifada, an increasing proportion of secular Palestinians have endorsed suicide attacks as an effective way of making the occupation unbearable for Israel (Nasra 2001; Telhami 2002). Despite the above-mentioned distinctions between the two types of motives, suicide bombers can also be motivated by a combination of religious and nationalist incentives, especially within the realm of Palestinian society (Pedahzur et al. 2003). The differences between the two motives can be understood only in terms of the subjective meaning of the act for the person who commits the suicide bombing, and in terms of the suicide bomber's psychological state.

Previous studies have shown that most suicide bombers are religious, young, male, unmarried, and unemployed, with some high school education (Ganor 2000). A study that examined the sociodemographic characteristics of suicide versus non-suicide terrorists revealed significant differences between the two types of terrorists: the mean age of suicide bombers was 24.5 years, they were older than non-suicide terrorists, more suicide bombers than non-suicide terrorists were educated in religious schools, and the percentage of suicide terrorists affiliated with religious fundamentalist organizations was higher than that of non-suicide terrorists (Pedahzur et al. 2003). It

should be noted the sociodemographic characteristics of the suicide bombers (young, unmarried, and unemployed) are congruent with those of suicide bombers in other terrorist organizations such as the “Black Tigers” (LTTE) in Sri Lanka (Gunaratna 2000) and female suicide bombers acting on behalf of the PKK in Turkey (Ergil 2000). Most of the female suicide bombers in Palestinian society are also in their twenties and single. However, in contrast to male suicide bombers, they have a higher level of education than the average population. In fact, some female suicide bombers are graduates of universities or other institutions of higher education (Berko 2004; Yaffeh 2003).

## 2. The Present Study

The period of the second Intifada significantly differs from other historical periods in Israeli history, because it has been characterized by intensive and numerous suicide attacks that have made civilian life into a battlefield. Against this background, the present study examines whether there were significant differences in the characteristics of suicide bombers with religious motives versus those with nationalist motives. The emphasis on distinctions between suicide bombers in terms of the motives for their activity provides new insights into these dimensions, and comparisons highlight changes that have occurred in the characteristics of suicide bombers since the outbreak of the second Intifada.

## 3. Method

Analyzing the differences between nationalist and religious suicide bombers prompts the question whether and how it is possible to distinguish between these two types of motives. Although the main motive of a suicide bomber is usually clear, there are some cases in which nationalist and religious motives are combined, especially within Palestinian society (Pedahzur et al. 2003). Therefore, scholars have suggested that differences between the two motives can only be examined in terms of the subjective meaning of the act for the suicide bomber and his psychological state. This distinction is based on previous studies which examined various aspects related to the motives for terrorism (Kimhi and Even 2004; Pedahzur et al. 2003). The present study relies on this approach; the analysis relates only to cases in which it was clear that the main motive of the terrorist was nationalist or religious. This distinction resulted from the set of perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes

expressed by the terrorists in interviews following their arrest. The motives of those terrorists who detonated themselves were determined based on their declarations prior to the event. The following examples reflect nationalist motives: “I wanted to sacrifice myself for Palestine, for my land,” “... like my brethren, I also wanted to contribute my share to the national struggle,” and “I wanted to do something good for the Palestinian homeland.” Examples of statements reflecting religious motives are: “I wanted to sacrifice myself for Allah,” “I wanted to be a *shahid* [a martyr], and go to heaven,” and “I wanted to die a martyr’s death.”

An additional methodological limitation resulted from the data collected from media coverage on suicide bombing. Newspaper reports are by nature selected and chosen extracts from the discourse on suicide bombing. Furthermore, media news reports on terrorist acts are also influenced by the Israeli security sources (Dor 2001; Korn 2004). However, despite this limitation, it should be noted that media coverage on suicide attacks is one of the main sources for studying suicide bombing and has been used in prior studies (Kimhi and Even 2004; Pedahzur et al. 2003). This limitation was dealt with in two ways. First, the effect of other sources on the media was minimized by relying on the suicide bomber’s psychological state or interviews following their arrest. Secondly, this study used a triangulated approach, which combined three different sources for information. The theoretical assumption behind this approach is that each source reveals different information on the phenomenon under investigation (Babbie 2001). The database for this study was established in two stages. First, data were derived from a stratified random sample of 294 articles on suicide bombers published in three major daily newspapers in Israel (*Yedi’ot Aharonot*, *Ma’ariv*, and *Ha’aretz*) between 2002 and 2005. Most of the reports concerning suicide bombers appeared on the first pages of the newspapers surveyed. Their length varied from several lines to two or three pages (in cases in which the terrorist succeeded). Once all of the articles were identified, a database was established with 176 cases in which the motive of the terrorist was clear. These cases were subsequently coded into the proper motive category. In an additional forty-three cases, the main motive was unclear or consisted of different motives combined together.

The relatively small number of cases in the sample is also a consequence of the tendency of the media to omit descriptions of the suicide bombers. This is not necessarily a representative sample, and the study is therefore categorized as an exploratory and preliminary study. However, it does provide an opportunity to examine the differences between the two motives of suicide bombers' and will provide new insights into the growing phenomenon of suicide attacks in Palestinian society.

### 3.1. Coding Procedures

The analysis was based on criteria formulated by Pedahzur et al. (2003). The dependent variable was type of motive (nationalist versus religious). Six independent variables were selected: age, sex, education (elementary, high school, academic), marital status, organizational affiliation (Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Fatah organizations), and prior involvement in terrorist acts (first event, not first event). The research method included inter-triangulation, which was carried out by two different coders who had been trained by the author. Each coder worked independently, read the articles, and coded them according to the appropriate categories. The coders also participated in practice sessions with the author before they began their actual work. The coding process established a quantitative database that included the characteristics as mentioned above. The practice sessions established initially acceptable intrarater reliability (a minimum of 85 percent agreement) and interrater reliability (Cohen's kappa  $\geq .80$ ). The final reliability values for the different categories are: age ( $K = .95$ ), education ( $K = .94$ ), marital status ( $K = .91$ ), organizational affiliation ( $K = .94$ ), and prior involvement in terrorist acts ( $K = .96$ ).

### 3.2. Data Analysis

The analysis in this study was conducted on two levels. The first level was a comparative analysis, which aimed to determine whether there were significant differences in the characteristics of suicide bombers with religious versus nationalist motives. Data analysis was conducted using a chi-square test for each of the characteristics, and a T-test for the age variable. Separate analyses were conducted for males and females, and for each type of motive. This decision was based on existing literature, which indicates that the profiles of female suicide bombers might be different than those of males (Berko 2004; Yaffeh 2003).

The second level of analysis was based on a logistic regression model. The analysis included the effects of the independent variables (age, sex, type of education, marital status, organizational affiliation and prior involvement in terrorist acts) on the type of motive for the suicide attack (religious versus nationalist). The logistic regression analysis was conducted for male and female bombers together, because there were not enough observations to conduct separate analyses by sex. Therefore, the terrorist's sex was examined as part of the other independent variables of the study.

## 4. Results

Table 1 presents the characteristics of suicide bombers as they were described in the press, by sex and type of motive (nationalist versus religious).

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that the mean age of the male suicide bombers was 20, whereas the female suicide bombers were older (mean age 22.6 years). T-tests results reveal that the age differences between male suicide bombers with religious motives and those with nationalist motives were not significant. A similar trend was found among the female suicide bombers. Results show that most of the male suicide bombers with nationalist motives had a high school education (69.5 percent), and some of them even had academic education (5.9 percent). By contrast, most of the male suicide bombers with religious motives had elementary school education (74.6 percent), and the rest had high school education (25.4 percent). These differences in education level by type of motive (nationalist versus religious) are reflected in the Chi-square tests ( $\chi^2 = 35.01$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Among female suicide bombers, however, no significant differences in education level were found by type of motive. Nonetheless, a higher percentage of female suicide bombers who were motivated by nationalism had academic education, compared to those with the religious motives (12 percent versus 8.3 percent). The vast majority of male and female suicide bombers were unmarried (about 85 percent), and no significant differences in marital status were found between the different types of motive.

Significant differences were, however, found in previous activity in terrorist organizations by type of motive

**Table 1: Suicide bombers' characteristics by motive and gender**

Motive	Female		Male	
	Religious (n=12)	Natural (n=28)	Religious (n=69)	National (n=67)
Age	M=22.8 (SD = .55)	M=22.6 (SD = .37)	M=19.8 (SD = 2.59)	M=20.2 (SD = 2.35)
Education				
Elementary	49.1	25.0	74.6	24.6
High school	42.6	62.5	25.4	69.5
Academic	8.3	12.5	0.0	5.9
Marital status				
Married	11.2	17.5	15.9	16.3
Unmarried	88.8	82.5	84.1	83.7
Prior involvement in terrorist acts				
First event	100.0	92.9	63.3	81.4
Not first event	0.0	7.1	36.7	18.6
Organizational affiliation				
Hamas	0.0	0.0	32.8	6.8
Islamic Jihad	56.2	64.7	59.7	85.2
Fatah	43.8	35.3	7.5	8.0

( $x^2 = 15.1$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). A higher percentage of males with religious motives had been active in terrorist organizations, compared to those who were motivated by nationalism (36.7 percent versus 18.6 percent, respectively). Previous activity in terrorist organizations among female suicide bombers is rare, and no significant differences were found by type of motive. Findings indicate that more male suicide bombers with religious motives belong to the Islamic Jihad organization than to the Hamas organization (59.7 percent versus 32.8 percent, respectively). In addition, most of the suicide bombers with nationalist motives belong to the Islamic Jihad organization (85.2 percent), whereas the rest belong to the Hamas and Fatah organizations (6.8 percent and 8 percent, respectively).

Chi-square tests revealed significant differences in affiliation with terrorist organizations by type of motive among male suicide bombers ( $x^2 = 18$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), whereas no significant differences in affiliation with terrorist organizations by type of motive were found among female suicide bombers. Most of the female suicide bombers belonged to Islamic Jihad (about 60 percent), while the rest belonged to Fatah. None of them belonged to Hamas. Table 2 presents the results of logistic regression analysis, by type of motive (nationalist versus religious).

**Table 2: Estimated effects of the suicide bomber's characteristics on the type of motive**

Variable	Odds Ratio	SE	Estimate
Age	1.02	0.01	.01
Sex	22.50	1.41	3.11*
Education A	8.96	2.19	2.19*
Education B	1.61	1.41	.47
Marital status A	2.02	1.28	.79
Prior involvement in terrorist acts	21.05	1.02	3.06
Organizational affiliation A	15.30	1.19	2.73*
Organizational affiliation B	3.46	1.13	1.24

Notes: Education A: 1 = elementary, 0 = non-elementary  
 Education B: 1 = academic, 0 = non-academic  
 Organizational affiliation A: 1 = Hamas, 0 = non-Hamas  
 Organizational affiliation B: 1 = Fatah, 0 = non-Fatah  
 \* $p < .05$

The results in Table 2 indicate that the suicide bomber's gender was significantly related to the type of motive for carrying out the attack. The probability that male suicide bombers will have religious motives is 22.5 times higher than the probability for female suicide bombers. However, age and marital status were not significantly related to the type of motive for carrying out a suicide bombing. Regarding the bomber's level of education, a significant relation-

ship was found with type of motive. The probability that suicide bombers with elementary education will have religious motives was 8.9 times higher than the probability for those with high school or academic education. Prior activity in terrorist organizations was not found to have a significant effect on type of motive for carrying out suicide bombings, whereas the nature of the terrorist organization was found to have a significant effect. The probability that suicide bombers belonging to Hamas will be motivated by the religious motives was 15.3 times higher than for those belonging to Islamic Jihad or to the Fatah organization.

### 5. Discussion

This paper presents the findings of an exploratory study on the characteristics of suicide bombers in Israel during the second Intifada. The unique contribution of this study lies in its analysis of the differences between the characteristics of suicide bombers with religious motives versus those with nationalist motives. As mentioned, the period of the second Intifada significantly differs from other historical periods in Israeli history, because it has been characterized by intensive and numerous suicide attacks. Thus, it provides a unique opportunity for comparison with earlier periods, which shed light on the changes that have occurred in the characteristics of suicide bombers since the outbreak of the second Intifada.

The first theme relates to the differences in the characteristics of suicide bombers who acted out of religious motives versus those who acted out of nationalist motives. The results of multivariate analysis revealed that the main differences were in gender, education, and affiliation with terrorist organizations. However, with regard to age and marital status, no significant differences were found between suicide bombers with religious versus nationalist motives. The findings indicated that the probability of religious motivation is higher among male than female suicide bombers. In addition, suicide bombers with nationalist motives had a higher level of education than those with religious motives. Likewise, the results showed that suicide bombers affiliated with Hamas were more likely to act out of religious motives than are those affiliated with the Islamic Jihad or the Fatah organizations. It can be assumed that this difference derives from the distinctions between the terrorist organizations in Palestinian society.

Notably, Hamas is a more extreme religious organization than Islamic Jihad and Fatah. Initially, the Hamas forbade women from participating in suicide bombings for religious reasons (Yaffeh 2003). However, this policy changed in 2002, after Sheikh Hassan Youssef made a declaration encouraging women to participate in suicide bombings. In January 2004, a female suicide bombing was collectively claimed by Hamas and the Al Aqsa brigades.

It should be noted, however, that although the main motive is usually clear, there are some cases in which the two motives are combined. Additionally, it can be assumed that the suicide bomber's declared motive is affected by the organization he or she belongs to, as well as by the messages that the organization seeks to convey to the public through the suicide attack. However, despite the complexity of the issue, research on the motives of suicide bombers contributes an essential dimension to understanding suicide attacks, and various aspects related to the motives for terrorism have been examined in previous research (Kimhi and Even 2004; Pedahzur et al. 2003). Broadening empirical knowledge on motives for terrorism makes it possible to enhance understanding of the growing phenomenon of suicide bombings.

Discussion of the characteristics of suicide bombers raises the question whether there might be one profile that typifies suicide bombers. A review of the research literature indicates that terrorism is a broad phenomenon that goes beyond characteristics such as socioeconomic status, level of education, employment, gender, and marital status. The findings of the present study also show that the range of characteristics such as age, level of education, and marital status is broad, and varies from one terrorist event to another. Hence, it cannot be argued that there is one profile or one social or psychological prototype that characterizes the suicide bomber. The prevailing opinion in research literature is that suicide terror is a multicausal phenomenon that cannot be explained by one factor or a single profile of the suicide bomber. Therefore, there are various approaches and explanations for suicide terror which include personal and group motives, environmental conditions, and their interactions (Kimhhi and Even 2004; Laster et al. 2004; Merarri 2004; Pedahzur et al. 2003; Stern 2003).

Comparing the results with the findings of research conducted prior to the Intifada reveals several changes that have occurred in the characteristics of suicide bombers in Palestinian society. Therefore, the Intifada period might have influenced the motivation of terrorists from different backgrounds to participate in suicide bombings. In addition, the period of the Intifada might have led to a change in the policy of terrorist organizations with regard to recruitment of suicide bombers. The first essential change during the Intifada was the participation of Palestinian women in suicide bombings. Research findings indicate that the percentage of female suicide bombers who acted out of nationalist motives was more than twice as high as those who acted out of religious motives. In addition, some of them had academic education and/or were married with children. The findings have also shown that female Palestinian terrorists have a higher level of education than their counterparts in other terrorist organizations (Ergil 2000; Gunaratna 2000).

Additionally, prior to the outbreak of the second Intifada, most of the suicide terrorists in Israel studied in religious schools (Ganor 2000; Pedahzur et al. 2003). The current study indicates that during the Intifada, the majority of suicide bombers who were motivated by nationalist motives had high school or academic education. It can thus be assumed that secular suicide bombers possessed a stronger national and social consciousness. This result is consistent with other studies, which indicate that following the outbreak of the second Intifada, the phenomenon of secular suicide bombers with nationalist motives began to increase (Telhami 2002).

The current findings reveal that the suicide bombers in the Intifada period were younger than those investigated by earlier studies. Specifically, the age range of suicide bombers was broader (14–25 years), and the mean age was 20 years compared 24.5 years in earlier studies (Pedahzur et al. 2003). Therefore, during the second Intifada there has been a decline in the age of suicide bombers and an increase in the involvement of minors (aged under 17) in suicide bombings in Israel. In contrast, no significant change was found in the marital status of the suicide bombers between the pre-Intifada period and during the Intifada: most of the suicide bombers are unmarried (Ganor 2000;

Gunaratna 2000). It can be assumed that the combination of being young and unmarried lowers the sense of personal and family commitment, and may contribute to willingness to carry out a suicide bombing. This assumption is based on research literature which indicates that most suicide bombers have weak family ties (Pedahzur et al. 2003). The current study shows that most of the suicide bombers were without prior experience in a terrorist organization. On this issue, existing research findings are inconsistent. Some studies have found that most suicide bombers were not previously involved in terrorist organizations (Ganor 2000; Nasra 2001), whereas other studies have revealed that previous activity in terrorist organizations was prevalent among suicide bombers (Pedahzur et al. 2003). It is possible that during the second Intifada the phenomenon of recruiting younger candidates without prior experience in a terrorist organization became increasingly prevalent. The findings of the present study reflect the specific nature of the Intifada period compared with other periods in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It can be assumed that changes in the characteristics of suicide terrorists during the second Intifada are not related only to the changes in the policies of the terrorist organizations. Rather, they also reflect changes in the attitude of Palestinian society toward suicide bombings.

Previous studies have shown that social support had a salient effect on the willingness of individuals in Palestinian society to commit suicide attacks during the second Intifada. Clearly, neither suicide bombers nor terrorist organizations operate in a vacuum, and they are influenced by the social environment and the support in the Palestinian society. Kimhi and Even, (2004) argue that although it is not always possible to differentiate between the spontaneous support of the Palestinian people and the social support directed by the terrorist organization, it seems that they are influenced by the environment, which encourages suicide attacks. Social support such as public assemblies, posters of the suicide bombers in the streets, and financial support for the families of suicide bombers have contributed toward establishing the collective perception of suicide attacks as a legitimate act of national liberation in Palestinian society. The findings of this study also highlight the need for more comprehensive research in this field. For example, it would be worthwhile to examine the impact of additional



variables such as family relations, employment, and socio-economic status. A more comprehensive analysis encompassing these factors would add to existing knowledge on the subject. Moreover, future studies might examine the explanations proposed here regarding changes in the processes of recruiting suicide bombers.

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