

Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Reality vs. Myth

Yoram Schweitzer

Introduction

On January 27, 2002, a terrorist bomb exploded in the handbag of Wafa Idris, a woman in her late twenties, at Jaffa Street in Jerusalem. The bomb killed Idris herself and an Israeli citizen, and wounded approximately fifty people. Idris, cast by the media as the first female Palestinian terrorist, was not intended to kill herself with her victims, according to the original plan of those who sent her. For some unknown reason, however, the bomb went off unexpectedly.¹ Nonetheless, as part of the suicide terrorist cult that was greatly strengthened in Palestinian society during the al-Aqsa intifada, Idris was crowned a hero throughout the entire Arab world and was portrayed as a symbol of the new Muslim feminism. She became famous as a noble and heroic expression of the collective desire of Muslim women in general, and of Palestinian women in particular, to enlist in the struggle against the enemies of the nation of Islam, chief among them Israel.²

The cult fostered by the Arab media around the image of Idris and the expressions of identification with her among the Palestinians have created a new model for Palestinian girls and women, as well as for Muslim women beyond the theater of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seeking to follow the same path.³ Thus, between Wafa Idris's action in January 2002 and the beginning of July 2006, sixty-seven Palestinian women were counted as planning to carry out suicide attacks (figure 1). Eight of the women blew themselves up; of these, five of the women were sent by the Fatah organization, two by Islamic Jihad in Palestine, and one by Hamas. The other women were arrested at the attacks' various stages of planning.

Most of the women (58 percent) were unmarried, and many were in their early twenties (figure 2). Thirty-nine percent were in the 18-25 age bracket, 16 percent were in the 26-35 age bracket, and 11 percent were under eighteen (figure 3). Almost half were educated: 22 percent had more than a high school education and 26 percent had a high

¹ Interview with Nasser Shawish, affiliated with Fatah, January 19, 2005.

² Raphael Israel, "Palestinian Women: The Quest for a Voice in the Public Square through 'Islamikaze Martyrdom,'" Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Hebrew University, Spring 2004, p. 83.

³ MEMRI, "Leadership of the Al Qaeda Women's Organization: Suicide Attacks by Women on the Way," March 13, 2003.

school education and were qualified for non-skilled labor (figure 4). Others were very young women with no high school education or profession.⁴

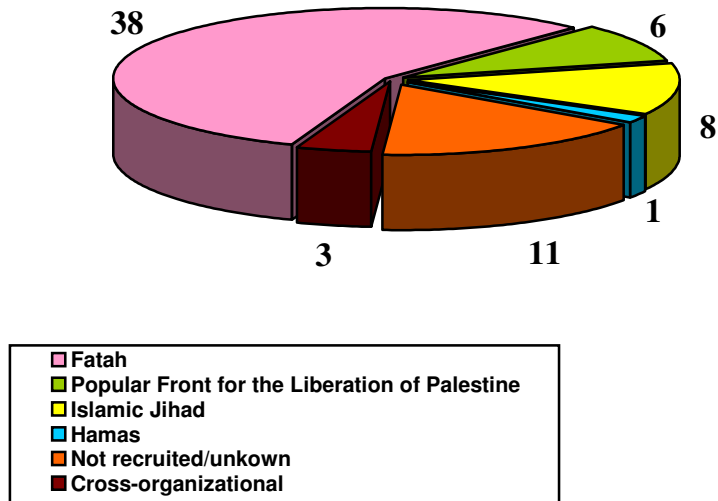


Figure 1: Female Suicide Terrorists: Organizational Affiliation

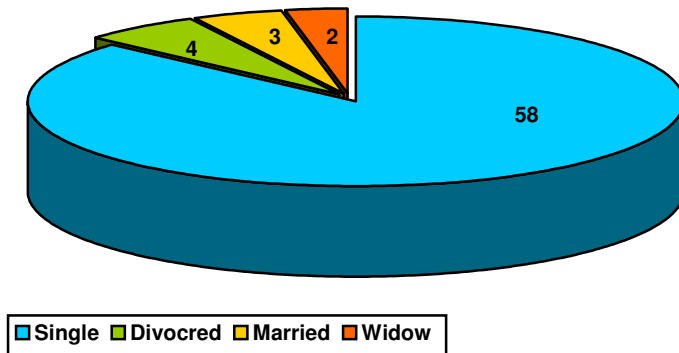


Figure 2. Female Suicide Terrorists: Marital Status (to May 2006)

⁴ The figures charted in the graphs were provided by the General Security Services in Israel, and were accurate as of mid-September 2005.

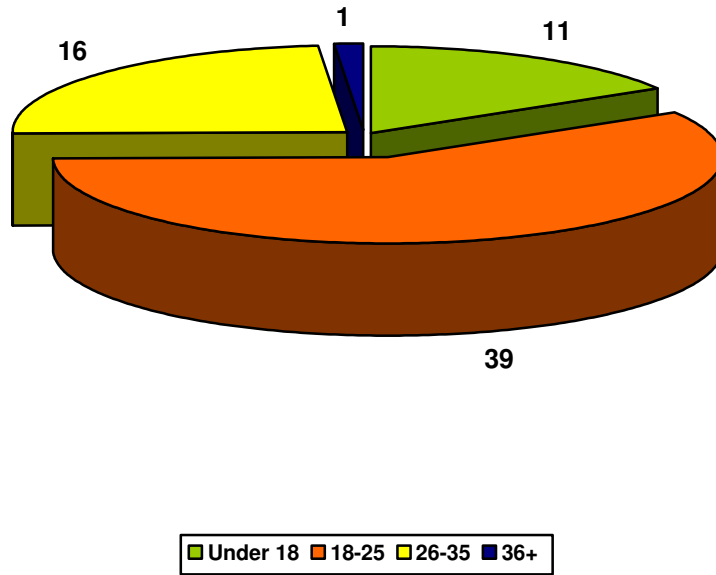


Figure 3: Female Suicide Terrorists: Breakdown by Age

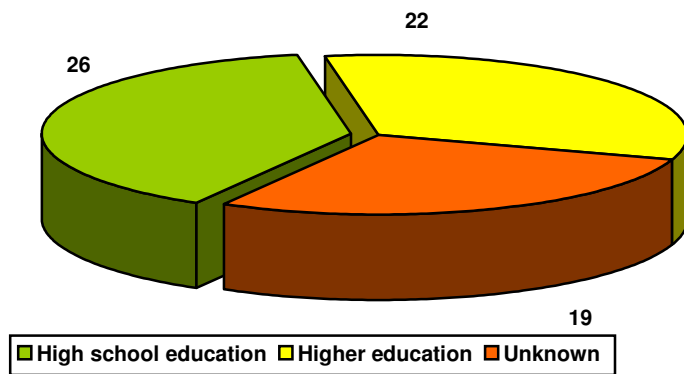


Figure 4. Female Suicide Terrorists: Education Level

The highly emotional parades in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in memory of the female suicide terrorists who blew themselves up, together with hymns of praise for them in the Arab media, have created the impression in the global media that the female suicide terrorists were a band of independent women, fully aware of what they were

doing, who were trying to take an active and equal part in the armed struggle and were fully supported by Palestinian society, as well as elsewhere. The question arises whether this one-dimensional image portrayed in the media is grounded in fact. Or, does a gap exist between the myth surrounding female Palestinian suicide terrorists and the personal and social reality in which they operated, which may have pushed many of them into volunteering for their missions.

The large number of imprisoned female Palestinian suicide terrorists, compared with the number under arrest in other places around the world, has created a demand for interviews with them among those wishing to study the motivation of female suicide terrorists. Israel's policy of media openness has acknowledged the fascination with the phenomenon of female suicide terrorists and made possible many interviews with those who did not complete their missions. These interviews with the women themselves have provided a critical dimension beyond the posthumous hype surrounding the women who blew themselves up. The interviews have thus constituted a key resource for drawing conclusions and attempting to understand the global phenomenon of female suicide terrorism.

I have conducted many personal interviews⁵ and conversations with Palestinian male and female political prisoners, including intended suicide terrorists and those who sent them, about their motives and the background to their actions. In the course of these conversations, their position concerning the involvement of Palestinian women in suicide terrorist attacks was examined specifically. In contrast to the enthusiasm with which they defended the right and duty of men to volunteer for actions against Israel, a decisive majority of the men interviewed by me contended that there was no need to employ women as suicide terrorists, and expressed opposition to women's involvement in this type of action. Their opposition was not due to a principled moral denial of the religious and national right of women to carry out the action. It mostly reflected their fear of possibly degrading of the honor of Palestinian women, which as such would be personally damaging to their honor as men. The principal anxiety concerning the honor of women lay in the conditions of their imprisonment, interrogation by men, body searches,

⁵ From early 2004 through July 2006, I conducted approximately one hundred official interviews, in addition to numerous unofficial conversations.

improper language about them and in their presence, and so forth. Those interviewed expressed concern about insensitive Israeli behavior towards all Palestinian women and lack of proper consideration for their honor in the future. It was also asserted that there were enough men to carry out the work, and that there was no need for women to do it for them.

This dissenting opinion is also reflected in the stance of the Palestinian organizations, which for a long time refrained from employing women as suicide terrorists. In the first wave of thirty-eight suicide terrorist attacks by Hamas and Islamic Jihad during the Oslo process in 1993-2000, all the perpetrators were men. When the al-Aqsa intifada broke out, the organizations' reservations about sending women began to moderate, but the operational change occurred only fifteen months after this intifada began. The first to include women in suicide terrorist attacks was Fatah in early 2002, followed by Islamic Jihad and finally Hamas, which was "forced reluctantly" to surrender to difficult field conditions and individual operational considerations in getting through Israeli roadblocks.

Nasser Shawish⁶ of Fatah was personally involved in sending three suicide terrorists, including a woman named Dareen Abu-Aisha. Shawish reiterated during all my conversations with him that in principle he opposed sending women, and had even continuously tried to persuade Abu-Aisha to abandon her determination to carry out a suicide mission: "I felt that she was a pretty and successful girl studying at the university, a future mother, who should marry and bear children, and help her people in other ways. But she wouldn't stop pressuring me." With Obeyda, his fiancée and Dareen's best friend, he tried to dissuade Dareen from carrying out the suicide attack and thereby protect her. For her part, Dareen threatened Shawish that unless he helped her become a shahida, she would buy a knife, go kill soldiers at a roadblock, and die that way. Shawish eventually changed his stance in this specific case, after his closest friend, Muhanad Abu Haliwa, was killed and, he said, after he witnessed the killing of the family of wanted terrorist Nabil Quake in Ramallah when they were hit by a missile fired at his car. These events pushed him into surrendering to her entreaties. "I looked for vengeance, and I wanted it

⁶ Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Nasser Shawish of Fatah on January 19, 2005.

to be special. Enough! I felt that a woman would be able to carry out this special attack that we planned more easily, and pass through the roadblocks, because of her innocent appearance.”⁷

Sharif, a Fatah operative responsible for sending the terrorist who perpetrated the attack on the Seafood Market Restaurant (which the Palestinians consider to be a suicide terrorist attack with light weaponry), said in an interview that he had also been asked at some point to send women on suicide missions. He said that in principle he had opposed sending women. He commented on both the practical side, and the limitations in sending women. He was asked to arrange a safe house for women who had volunteered to carry out suicide terrorist attacks, so that they would not be seen in public before they were sent. Though he arranged the safe house as requested, he did not want to deal with them, because he was afraid of what would be said about him as a single man entering an apartment together with two women. He was concerned that the good name of his family would also be affected, and was particularly anxious about the reactions of the families of the girls, who would have held him responsible for sending their daughters.⁸

Abd al Rauf Kawasme, a failed Hamas suicide terrorist from a group of soccer players on a Hebron team who volunteered as a group to carry out suicide terrorist attacks also expressed opposition to the involvement of women in this type of activity “because there are enough men who will do it, and this is men’s work. Women should concentrate on social and other activity.”⁹ Indeed, in interviews I conducted with Hamas members, they all expressed unequivocal opposition to the involvement of women. In support of their view, they said that their organization had not sent women as suicide terrorists, except for the case of Reem al-Riyashi, which they did not regard as a change in policy by the organization but as a “temporary constraint of tough reality on the ground.” A Hamas prisoner from the Gaza Strip expressed strong opposition to his organization's sending of al-Reyashi, a mother of two small children. In a moment of candor, he confessed that as asserted by Israel, he had heard from trusted sources from his hometown that al-Riyashi had had an affair with a senior Hamas operative, and expressed

⁷ Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Nasser Shawish of Fatah on January 19, 2005.

⁸ Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Sharif Naji of Fatah on February 27, 2005.

⁹ Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Abed al-Raouf Jihad Kawasme of Hamas on September 27, 2005.

horror that matters had deteriorated to the point where people in his organizations were having intimate relations with a married woman and sending her to blow herself up.

It should be emphasized that most of those interviewed did not dispute the right of any Palestinian to act in defense of his or her people. To them, however, the correct way for women to act was different – not through suicide terrorist attacks. Interestingly, this included many who opposed sending women on suicide missions but nonetheless claimed that they saw no difference in principle between male and female suicide terrorists. Some had themselves sent women on such missions. Amjad Ubeidi is an Islamic Jihad senior operative responsible for sending Nihadi Jardat on October 4, 2004 on an attack against the Maxim restaurant in Haifa, which killed twenty-one people and wounded fifty, in revenge for the death of her fiancé and his best friend. He claimed that he had tried to persuade her not to go on the mission, but that her determination and reasons for carrying it out had convinced him to help her.¹⁰ In an interview published by al-Jazeera, Ubeidi proclaimed that "in our society, the death of a son is much more difficult to the parents than the death of a daughter. The grief for the loss of ten daughters will not match the grief of the loss of one boy, because his role in society is much greater."¹¹ In a later interview he clarified his statement as referring specifically to a bomber's family that lost the only son it had, with no implication that girls are worth less than boys.

Muatez Haimouni, who sent Andalib Taqtaqah to the Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem where she killed six people and wounded dozens more (on April 12, 2004), also claimed that in his view, there was no difference between men and women as suicide terrorists. He said that the combination of the woman's determination to volunteer for the mission and the urgent operational need to strike against Israelis, which for tactical purposes required the use of a woman instead of a man in order to bypass obstacles, had convinced him to send her without hesitation. Loyal to his purportedly egalitarian stance, Himouni also recruited an Israeli Arab girl to assist in the plot following a friendship/romance they developed over the internet.¹²

¹⁰ Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Amjad Ubeidi on January 24, 2005.

¹¹ Al-Jazeera, interview with Amjad Ubeidi, August 16, 2005.

¹² Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with Latifa Saadi of Fatah on April 18, 2006.

Beyond these observations, special insights are gleaned from the disclosures of the women themselves. Presented below are interviews with three female suicide terrorists who were caught before they carried out their plans. Two of the women were en route to their target, and a third was arrested at home a short time before going into action. The three women were young and unmarried, aged twenty to twenty-six. They related different and sometimes contradictory versions of their motives and the circumstances in which they volunteered for their missions.

The specific women have been portrayed here because they granted a number of interviews at different times, some public and some personal, to various people from the media and to academic researchers. In contrast to the interviews with people from the media, the conversations with academics were conducted as personal conversations and included a number of meetings. Predictably, the media interviews were of a more declarative character and were filled with outspokenly nationalistic, and sometimes also religious, messages that they or their organizations wished to deliver to viewers and readers. Such messages were not completely absent from the personal interviews, but the number, length, and context of the messages differed. More personal aspects also emerged in the one-on-one interviews, which helped clarify some missing particulars that were obscured by all the nationalist pronouncements. These aspects made it clear that their motives were more complex than those outwardly declared.

Most prominent was the women's contradictory versions of their stories, and the general effect that collective time with fellow political prisoners had on their autobiographies. This aspect emerged especially in the personal interviews but in some of the media interviews as well, conducted in the earlier stages of their imprisonment, before they were briefed by their domineering cellmates. In these personal interviews, the women expressed a strong feeling that their difficult personal situation had been exploited to lead them to volunteer for their mission, without their having fully thought through the deed they planned to commit. In contrast, personal remarks were generally absent from the media interviews conducted with them after they had already spent time in prison. The latter interviews were primarily products of an indoctrination process, formal or informal, in prison. They bore a dominant nationalistic character, and reflected the uniform dogmatic messages that the organizations wished to deliver.

Thouria Khamour

Thouria Khamouri, born in 1976, lived in Jba in the Jenin area. She was arrested on May 19, 2002, one day before she planned to leave to carry out a suicide terrorist attack in Jerusalem. She was arrested at home, before embarking on the mission she had volunteered for two weeks previously.

Thouriya was interviewed a number of times in 2002-4. In these interviews, she gave different versions of her motives and the way she was recruited for her mission. As more time passed in prison, she changed her description of the circumstances under which she volunteered and the motives she declared. She recast herself from a girl whose personal motives dominated to a flag bearer for the Palestinian and Islamic national struggle against the Zionist enemy.

The first interview took place ten days after her arrest. She said that she had volunteered for the mission out of personal motives, explaining, “sometimes a person is subject to such great pressure and mental distress that it leads to an explosion.” Thouria said that she had volunteered for the operation mostly because of rejection by society and her family’s objections to a man who wished to marry her. She claimed that she had in any case never intended to carry out the mission. “I regretted it,” she said, and gave three reasons for her decision that she would not act. “I began to think that I was killing people, babies, women, and sick people, and to imagine my family sitting in a restaurant, and someone blowing them up,” she explained. As another reason, she said that she feared “that God would not regard it (her personal circumstances) as a worthy motive, and would therefore not consider her a shahida.” The most significant reason she gave, however, was the order that her handlers gave her that she must blow herself up in any event, even if it was not in the middle of a mass of people. “I felt that they were trading in the blood of shahids,” she stated.¹³

In other conversations in prison with an academic researcher, Thouria talked about the personal problems that had led her to take her life into her hands. “I was 25 years old, unmarried, and my situation at home wasn’t good. At age seventeen, I already

¹³ Yoav Limor, “I Felt Rejected,” Maariv Net, May 30, 2002.

tried to harm myself twice, but they stopped me."¹⁴ According to her account, at age twenty, after looking for personal and social fulfillment, and after her parents rebuked her for the way she dressed and her tomboyish behavior and warned her that she would be unable to find a husband, "I started returning to religion, wearing traditional clothing, and behaving like a girl. I very much wanted to get married."¹⁵

She stayed in school only until the tenth grade. She was a mediocre student, and did not continue her studies. She went to work, but did not apply herself there and changed jobs several times. Due to her unstable way of life, her family considered her a weak and difficult person who should be watched carefully so that she would not dishonor her family. When she finally found a prospective groom to share a new life with her, a man who was disabled, and the two agreed to marry, her family strongly opposed the match because of his disability and because of a disagreement over the price that the groom's family would have to pay to her father. As a result, the marriage was called off. Thouria related that the young man had been her only chance of getting married, which her father had destroyed, and that she had therefore decided to take revenge on him by becoming a shahida. From this point, the road to her assignment to a suicide mission was short. She met with a young man she knew to be a recruiter of suicide terrorists. Through him, she began a process that was interrupted with her arrest by the Israeli security forces upon their receipt of intelligence information. "The minute I decided to become a suicide terrorist, I knew that I had to do it. Perhaps then my father would have understood me... they used me... I'm so sorry."¹⁶

In a later interview she granted to *Maariv* magazine in September 2004, after spending a long time in prison with her cellmates, a more belligerent Thouria appeared, telling a completely different and altruistic story, with no trace of personal motives. She said that the main theme of her life was the struggle against Israeli occupation. She declared that she had volunteered for her mission

because I wanted to become a shahida and sacrifice myself for Palestine by killing many Jews... I calculated how many Jews I should kill for it to be considered a success, and for it to be worth my death. How many?

¹⁴ Anat Berko, "On the Way to the Garden of Eden – The World of Female and Male Suicide Terrorists and Their Handlers," Yediot Ahronot Press, 2004, p. 130.

¹⁵ Berko, p. 130.

¹⁶ Berko, p. 131.

As many as possible – wherever there was a crowd... I closed my eyes, and dreamed of injuring more than 100 or 200 Jews. A large number. I thought only of that. To sacrifice myself, and that hundreds of Jews would die.

She later explained that although as a Muslim she knew that there were four acts forbidden by her religion (uproot a tree, kill a child, kill an old person, and kill a woman),

the Jewish baby who would have died in the attack would become a soldier tomorrow, and would do what your soldiers are doing now. He would murder Palestinians and occupy Palestine, so I felt comfortable with the decision I finally made, that I was going to do something good for the fatherland. It wasn't something I did spontaneously; it came after long thought. I was proud of myself, because it required a lot of willpower. It wasn't easy to make such a decision, but my faith in God and my love for Palestine and Jerusalem helped me.

She finished on a selfless, socially conscious note: “I asked that if I succeeded in carrying out my mission, my reward would go to Palestinian orphans. I wanted to sacrifice myself for my country and God.”¹⁷

In an interview that she granted to the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* in September 2004, Thouria portrayed herself as a fearless warrior who initiated the terrorist attack and collected intelligence for it before joining the Tanzim members who planned to send her on the mission. She said that she had turned to them only because she needed a sponsor. She attributed her volunteering for the mission to her family who had educated her “to oppose the occupation,” and to the humiliation that her father had undergone at the hands of the Israeli army. Thouria described the preparations for the missions, which amounted to a conversation in which her seriousness was evaluated, and forty-five minutes of instruction about how to activate the bomb in the bag that she was to have carried. She said, “I began to feel close to the Garden of Eden, and that the belt with which I had practiced [before she was given the bomb-filled bag] had become part of my body.” Later in the interview she said that her forthcoming marriage had been deliberately calculated because she had wanted to mislead the Israelis and not be suspected by them, as somebody who is engaged doesn't volunteer for this kind of operation.

¹⁷ Chen Kost-Bar, “I Dreamed of Killing over 100,” *Maariv* magazine, January 23, 2004.

Thouria's interviews demonstrate in an extreme way the phenomenon of female suicide terrorists undergoing indoctrination in prison. During their imprisonment, they construct, accept, or adapt the national and religious narrative, and shape their story to explain their motives for volunteering for their missions. Sometimes, they go from personal explanations for suicide terrorism to adopting national and religious explanations, full of altruism and heroism against a demonized enemy, whose deeds justify every kind of action, including indiscriminate murder of innocent people.

Arin Ahmad

Arin Ahmad, unmarried and a resident of Beit Sakhour, was arrested on the way to a suicide terrorist attack in Rishon LeZion in 2002, when she was twenty years old. Arin volunteered to take part in a double suicide terrorist attack in Rishon LeZion, but at the last minute, when she was near the target, she decided that she did not want to carry it out. She returned to her handlers and demanded that they bring her back to her home, despite efforts by the person who brought her to the scene to persuade her to persist in her mission. Another person sent with her on the same suicide mission blew himself up. Arin said that he, too, had regretted taking on the mission, and had returned to the man who accompanied them to their target. In contrast to her, however, he was eventually persuaded to complete the mission.

The first formal report in which Arin told about her action took place during a visit to the prison by then-Minister of Defense Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who asked to meet suicide terrorists who had survived in order to understand their motives. In a conversation with him, Arin expressed her concern about what was in store for her, following what she termed "a momentary fall." She claimed in her defense that she had retracted her intention in the moment of truth.¹⁸ In answer to the minister's question why she had wanted to carry out a suicide terrorist attack and whether she had been religiously motivated, she said that her motive was personal. The Israelis had killed the man who had been her boyfriend for a year and a half. "I was in distress, and I was depressed," she said.¹⁹ When asked what she wanted to happen and whether she had wanted to kill Jews

¹⁸ Vered Levy Barzilai, "An Experience of Near-Death," *Haaretz*, June 2002, p. 1.

¹⁹ Barzilai, pp. 5-6.

in order to avenge the death of her boyfriend, she answered, “I don’t know what I wanted. I was hurt and angry. I have many friends from the university who are active in Fatah Tanzim. We sat together one evening, and they talked about how they wanted to organize revenge for the operations that Israelis were carrying out in the territories. I sat and listened in silence, and thought about Jad, my boyfriend, and I suddenly told them, ‘You know what? I’m going to carry out a suicide terrorist attack, and that’s that.’ A minute before that, I hadn’t thought of such a thing.”²⁰ Arin assumed that the process of volunteering would take a long time, during which they would gradually prepare her for the mission. Instead, however, the process moved ahead at a dizzying pace. After only four days, they called her up, blessed her, and told her that the organization had approved sending her on the mission. “They didn’t give me enough time to think about what was happening. They pushed and encouraged me. I did everything they told me,” she said. When she was asked about what her action would do to her family, she answered that she didn’t think about them, but rather about her boyfriend.²¹

In a number of personal interviews that I conducted with Arin in prison in early 2005, she came across as an articulate educated young woman with very strong opinions. Like many suicide terrorists whom I interviewed in prison, she did not refrain from describing the plight of the Palestinians, and asserted that Israel bore exclusive responsibility for their volunteering for suicide missions. Arin strongly opposed the claim that the main trigger for her volunteering for the mission had been the death of her boyfriend. When I told her that I had understood this from what I had read in her interviews and what I heard from her between the lines, she stated,

The goal of my going on the mission was not vengeance; it was to deliver a message to people in Israel to stop the occupation, and to make them feel the pain that the Palestinians felt. We tried to stop our suffering many times, in various ways, but no one listened to us. As a Palestinian girl, how can I stop the suffering if my home is constantly under occupation, and there are tanks surrounding my home, while everyone in the world is enjoying music, and the only melody I can hear is the sound of bullets. Had I carried out my mission, I would have made Israeli society think twice about why I had blown myself up. The Israelis who voted for Sharon are to blame for the situation that has been created.

²⁰ Barzilai, p. 6.

²¹ Barzilai, p. 6.

She explained the reason why she had backed out by saying, “I eventually realized that both I and the Israelis I would be killing were human beings, that I had no right to take their lives, and that God would be angry at me if I assumed this right myself.”²²

In these conversations, Arin was hesitant to say explicitly that her handlers had exploited her unhappy personal situation to lead her to go through with her slip of the tongue and send her to her death. When I told her that our conversations had made this as clear as daylight to me, she smiled in assent, and said that when she got out, she would have something to say to several people.²³ Arin expressed anger at those who had sent her for not honoring her decision to avoid killing women and children, and especially for trying to persuade her to retract her decision not to carry out the suicide attack, and later trying to send her on another terrorist mission. In my conversations with the handler who had been responsible for sending her on the mission, he denied that he had tried to persuade her to go on another mission.²⁴ This denial was echoed by the person who drove her to and from the site of the operation.²⁵

Arin is one of a relatively rare type of suicide terrorist (female and male): those who changed their minds after reaching their target, because they decided, out of moral principle, not to kill innocent people. In conversation, Arin gave an impression of credibility, maturity, and articulateness, which are not typical characteristics of suicide terrorists. In her interviews, she took care to project a tough nationalistic line, which she regarded as completely justified. Yet there were nonetheless elements of uncertainty and questioning. Although she refrained from explicitly condemning suicide terrorist operations and linked the rationale for them to the prevailing military and political situation in the region, she ended one of her interviews with the rhetorical question, addressed mostly to herself, “How can I condemn suicide terrorist attacks when I myself went on such a mission?”

²² Interview conducted by Yoram Schweitzer with Arin Ahmad on March 22, 2005.

²³ Interview conducted by Yoram Schweitzer with Arin Ahmad on March 2, 2005.

²⁴ Interview conducted by Yoram Schweitzer with Ahmad Mugarbi on October 6, 2005.

²⁵ Interview conducted by Yoram Schweitzer with Ibrahim Sarakhne on November 14, 2005

Wafa al-Bas

On the morning of June 20, 2005, Wafa Samir Ibrahim al-Bas, aged twenty-one, a resident of the Jabalya refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip, came to the Erez roadblock with ten kilograms of explosives hidden in her underclothes. She was en route to the Soroka Medical Center in Beersheva, where she planned to blow herself up. Al-Bas had been badly burned in an accident in late 2004 when a heater in her family's home exploded, seriously injuring her. She was treated at the Soroka Medical Center. Seizing this opportunity, the people who sent her attempted to have her carry out a suicide terrorist attack at the hospital where she had a medical checkup scheduled.

The Erez roadblock is located on the boarder between the Gaza Strip and Israel. When al-Bas neared the place where security checks were conducted, she aroused the suspicion of the Israeli security forces. Realizing that her plan had been discovered, she unsuccessfully tried a number of times to activate the explosive device on her person. After the explosives were neutralized, she was arrested and brought for questioning

Shortly after, the print and broadcast media were allowed to conduct interviews with al-Bas. In contrast to the two cases discussed above, all the interviews with her were conducted during a single day, before she was brought to the prison facility with her compatriots and before she underwent any process of indoctrination and preparation for interviews. In contrast to her compatriots, who were more personal in their initial interviews, al-Bas's initial interviews were of a demonstratively belligerent nationalistic character. She presented an inflexible and uncompromising stance regarding her motives and the reason that she had enlisted for her mission. Only in later interviews on the same day, when her demonstrative single-mindedness begin to dissipate, did she express her realization that her handlers had exploited her disability and resulting poor mental state.

The contrast between interviews was stark. In her initial interviews, al-Bas declared, "I wanted to kill forty to fifty Israelis. I didn't care whether children would be among them. Our children also died. I had no personal reasons. All my motives were nationalistic, coming from my heart and stemming from my beliefs. I believe in death. This is a privilege for us, especially death in the way of Allah. I'm also a victim of my country. I'm willing to sacrifice myself a thousand times."²⁶ In another interview, she

²⁶ Eli Bohadana and Amit Cohen, "A Patient in the Service of Terrorism," *Maariv*, June 21, 2005, p. 4.

said that ever since she had been a small child, she had wanted to die for Allah, and that her dream had been, and still remained, to be a shahida, and to die for Allah. “I enlisted from nationalistic and religious motives in order to defend the people and the land, and for no other reason...I’m a daughter of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and I wanted to carry out a suicide mission in order to participate in the freedom struggle.”²⁷ At this point, she still denied that her volunteering had been connected with her difficult external appearance caused by the many burns and scars on her body: “All my motives are nationalistic, coming from my heart and stemming from my beliefs. I believe in death. This is a privilege for us, especially death in the way of God. I’m also a sacrifice of my country, and I’m willing to sacrifice myself a thousand times.”²⁸

In later media interviews, however, she claimed that the explosives had been planted on her without her knowledge, when she was under the influence of drugs in a Palestinian hospital. In one interview, she even burst into tears and wailed, “Yesterday, I was free. I remember how I was yesterday, and I see how I am today.” In this interview, it seemed that she had suddenly been struck by the recognition that those who sent her may have exploited her: “Forgive me, Mother, I wish I hadn’t done this to myself, I wish I had listened to you.” At the end of the interview, al-Bas said that her parents, who had known about her intention, had attributed her deed to her fears that she would be a burden to her family and that her death would help them through the financial compensation that they would receive from Fatah.²⁹

Some time later, I saw Wafa for a short while in prison but was not allowed by her protective associates to converse with her, under the claim that she was still in a difficult emotional state. Still, we exchanged a few words when she entered a cell where I was interviewing her friends. She seemed quite happy, smiled, and greeted me, and I told her that I was glad to see her alive. Later one of her fellow inmates confided that she had pressed Wafa about her recruitment and especially, why she tried to blow herself in the Erez zone after she was quarantined, even though it was obvious she couldn't hurt any Israeli. Wafa confessed that she was solicited by her friend – the sister of the dispatcher –

²⁷ The Center for the Intelligence Heritage, The Center for Intelligence and Terrorism Information, June 21, 2005.

²⁸ Eli Bohadana and Amit Cohen, “A Patient in the Service of Terrorism,” *Maariv*, June 21, 2005, p. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

to volunteer. She agreed, but when she subsequently had second thoughts, she was threatened so that she would fulfill her mission. Her senders told her to blow herself up even if she was spotted by the Israelis and she attempted to do so because this was the order; in other words, she followed the orders out of her overwhelming fear.³⁰

The many versions given by al-Bas to the media during a brief period represented the typical fluctuating and contradictory versions of their motives given by female suicide terrorists. In this case, she went within a short period of time from stressing declared ideological nationalistic motives to a public pondering of her personal motives that had been cultivated and exploited by those who sent her. Her transition from belligerent nationalistic statements and predominantly religious arguments to a realization that her handlers had taken advantage of her by encouraging her fears regarding her social disability and unfortunate physical and cosmetic state to recruit her for a deed that would bestow national fame on her and economic benefit to her family was rapid and intense. At the same time, it will come as no surprise if during her imprisonment (she was sentenced to fourteen years in prison), she will undergo an indoctrination process by her cellmates that will lead her too to present once again a nationalistic and religious version to the media as her sole motive for volunteering for her mission.

Conclusion

The involvement of women in suicide terrorist attacks carried out by various organizations around the world is an established fact. At the same time, even though women are an integral part of the phenomenon, their numbers are still small, compared with the number of male suicide terrorists, and their role in the suicide terrorist apparatus is limited. They do not manage the organizations, hold command positions, or send other people on suicide terrorist missions. Among the Palestinian organizations, the status of female suicide terrorists does not differ from those of their counterparts around the world. The female Palestinian suicide terrorists do not take part in the decision making process in their organizations, and their opinions are not the determining factor even in the suicide missions on which they are sent, except for their volunteering or expressing agreement to take part in these missions.

³⁰ Interview by Yoram Schweitzer with an assistant to a suicide operation, January 19, 2005.

The media image of the female Palestinian suicide terrorists as independent women with strong opinions and a key role in the process that led them to their deaths in the service of a national or religious ideal fades away when sincere personal conversations are held with them. This feeling is reinforced by conversations with male suicide terrorists, and particularly with those who sent the women on their missions and say that the use of women in suicide missions is a matter of tactical necessity, dictated mainly by operational difficulties. In the absence of these factors, they would have avoided including women in this type of action, which is not accepted in the conservative societies in which they operate. They admit that, to a great extent, Palestinian society continues to embrace the traditional image of women as responsible for educational and social functions, or at most helpers of male warriors – definitely not leaders of divisions into battle, or fighters sacrificing their lives on their own.

In the many interviews granted by female suicide terrorists to the various media, some of which were conducted after they underwent indoctrination by their cellmates, they indicated that they regarded themselves as fulfilling the function of publicizing nationalistic messages. This theme often comes in stark contradiction to the personal interviews that they granted soon after their arrest. They explained their volunteering for missions in terms of equal participation in the national struggle of their people. Particularly in the Arab media, they are thus marketed as independent and determined women with strongly held opinions, who decided to take their fate into their hands with a feeling of completeness and destiny – rather like a modern version of Joan of Arc. They are portrayed as having special, noble personal qualities, and are also used to motivate men to follow their example. Yet more thorough probing and examination of the interviews with the female Palestinian suicide terrorists, which to a large extent has defined the image of female suicide terrorists around the world, is likely to paint a more complete, complex picture of reality.

Accordingly, a more critical reading of what the female suicide terrorists have said and an examination of the changes in their interviews over time is warranted. Particular attention should be paid to the time when the interview was conducted, relative to the date when the person interviewed was arrested. The reader should be aware of the process of socialization and organizational and national conformity reflected in many of

the later interviews. The statements as to their motivation to be a martyr, made by both Palestinian and other female suicide bombers worldwide, may reflect their authentic need to take part in fighting against their people's enemy, but it does not in any way change their unequal and inferior social status as well as the reluctance of their traditional societies to include women in these operations.