

**THE POOR MAN'S STRATEGIC WEAPON:
THE RISE OF PALESTINIAN SUICIDE BOMBINGS**

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*This thesis is dedicated to Sarah and Mordechai Erlich.
Their nobility in action continues to inspire me.*

“It may be that happiness has no degrees – but there are certainly gradations of suffering. If you subject a man to the first degree of suffering, he will strive to return to his starting-point. But if you push him further down the ladder – he will no longer dream of returning to a state of non-suffering; he will dream of getting back to the immediately previous stage. He will almost have forgotten what goes on outside and beyond this last stage of suffering. And the lesson is one that throws much light on many of the phenomena of the grim and evil age in which we live.”

– Menachem Begin in *The Revolt*

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Introduction

Since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Palestinians in the Middle East region have waged a continuous struggle against the Israeli people in an attempt to regain the land of Palestine. Fundamental to their resistance efforts is the belief that the Israelis wrongfully “stole” the territories of Palestine and created a national Zionist homeland at the expense of the Palestinians.¹ Without a standing army and, for a long time, without clear leadership structures, the Palestinians turned to guerrilla warfare and terror tactics to fight back. Intimidation and retribution were always prominent factors guiding the use of terrorism, but as the situation in the Middle East developed with time, so did the rationale for using violent means.

With the dawn of the 21st century, the complexities of the international security situation have substantially increased. Technological advancements and the ease of transportation have made weapons of all types and sizes available to those with the capacity to purchase them. Furthermore, chemical and biological weapons – often called the “poor man’s nuclear bomb” – continue to pose significant risks to all nations because of difficulties in detection and containment. Yet despite the proliferation of nuclear and bioweapons, these arms cannot be obtained by all those who seek to cause havoc. In this context, Palestinian extremists have resorted to an alternative strategic weapon – a new “H-bomb” – the human bomb.²

The Palestinian people have no determined homeland, little economic prosperity, and are increasingly frustrated with their inability to make gains against the much stronger enemy – the Israelis. They are a people desperate for change, clinging to a small

¹ Hasan Abdel Rahman, personal interview, 24 October 2002.

² Gal Luft, “The Palestinian H-Bomb: Terror’s Winning Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 81 (July/August 2002): 2.

territory predominantly controlled by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and without the military support of their Arab brethren who were never willing to accept them into their own lands. In light of these facts, the story behind Palestinian terror unravels: with the assistance of state-sponsorship, the Palestinians utilize terrorism in an attempt to weaken the resolve of the Israeli people. The extremist Palestinians intend to hurt Israeli morale by committing a continuous wave of unsettling bus and other publicly-aimed bombings, generally small in scale and carried out by individuals belonging to one of the several radical organizations that employ terrorism.³

Over the last two decades, suicide bombing has reemerged as a favored tactic among certain terrorist groups largely because of the fear it generates and the unsophisticated technology required to commit accurate, destructive attacks. In 1983, the Lebanese Shiite militant group Hezbollah adopted the tactic of suicide bombings in their attempts to force Israel to retreat from southern Lebanon. In the 1990s, the Al-Qaeda terrorist network embraced suicide attacks, and by 1994, the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas (an acronym for *harakat al-muqawama al-islamiyya*, or Islamic Resistance Movement) began employing suicide bombings as a strategic weapon.

With the signing of the Oslo Accords and the Declaration of Principles on the White House lawn in September of 1993, outraged Palestinians began a massive wave of attacks throughout Israel. Aside from traditional tactics such as drive-by shootings, random murders, or small-scale explosive detonations, the period beginning in late 1993 marked the renewal of Palestinian efforts to use suicide bombing as a tactical weapon. On April 6, 1994, Hamas committed a suicidal car-bomb attack on a bus in the center of

³ Most recently, these terrorist groups include the Fatah Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ, or simply Islamic Jihad), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP).

Afula claiming eight Israeli lives. This action is most notable because it was the first successful suicide attack during my initial period of examination September 13, 1993 to September 28, 2000. Over the course of these seven years, a total of 24 suicide bombing incidents took place claiming over 160 Israeli lives.⁴

Attempts to slow the wave of violence were largely unsuccessful throughout the 1990s, although there was a temporary halt in suicide attacks for a period of almost two years from early November 1998 to late October 2000. However, following the failure of the Camp David talks in the summer of 2000, the Palestinian resistance movement was reinvigorated. As Fouad Ajami commented, "In the long scheme of Palestinian history, the last phase of troubles...marks yet another occasion when Palestinian nationalism was offered statehood and opted instead for the politics of ruin and the romance of deadly insurrection."⁵ Thus, the second episode of terror attacks began October 26, 2000 and continues to the present day.⁶ During this recent two-year period, there have been more than 100 suicide attacks claiming over 345 Israeli lives. This marked surge – at least a three-fold increase – is rather remarkable considering the relatively short amount of elapsed time.⁷ My thesis will seek to explain this phenomenon: why have the frequencies of Palestinian suicide bombings increased so dramatically in the past two years? What prompts the increased reliance on this particular terror tactic as a means of continuing the struggle against the State of Israel?

⁴ The figures cited have been calculated on the basis of press reports and information from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁵ Fouad Ajami, "Intifada: the Future As History," *U.S. News and World Report* (4 June 2001) 34.

⁶ For the purposes of this thesis, the second period of examination will begin September 29, 2000 and end December 31, 2002.

⁷ See appendix for a graph and chart of bombing statistics.

Examining a wide range of documents, journals, and other scholarly work, this paper will prove that the maturation and growth of the current Palestinian generation – along with ideological and psychological stimuli – have worked in conjunction with a number of other factors to produce the suicide bombing surge. I will argue that there is not one specific explanation for this phenomenon – rather, it is a *unique* combination of circumstances that, when brought together, proved to have deadly effects. As David Long has stated, “single-factor explanations overlook the fact that terrorist behavior is an interaction between individual psychology and external environment, not the result of one or the other.”⁸ Using the Palestinians as a case study, this thesis will also assess the use of terrorism as a means of achieving political goals. Evaluating strategic concerns posed by terrorism in the Middle East and its implications for other geopolitical zones will allow for discussion of larger international relations themes. To specifically address the thesis questions, an in-depth explanation of the roots of conflict and use of terrorism between Arabs and Israelis will be necessary.

Thus, the first chapter of this thesis will examine the historical roots of Palestinian terrorism, tracing the evolution of terror organizations throughout the 20th century. This section will discuss the development of Arab resentment towards the Israelis, the early forms of Arab terror attacks, and define Palestinian objectives after 1948. Emphasis is also focused on the 1967 war and its ramifications for the peace process in the years that followed. The chapter does not go into significant detail about the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict itself, but rather limits its scope to the role terrorism plays in that on-going struggle. Understanding the rationale of Palestinians in the 21st century and their reliance

⁸ David E. Long, The Anatomy of Terrorism (New York: The Free Press, 1990) 16.

on terrorism is largely impractical without reviewing the nature and evolution of the Palestinian resistance movement.

The second chapter concentrates on the theoretical framework surrounding Palestinian terrorism. The chapter begins by providing a working definition of terrorism and then discusses the prominence of state-sponsored terror. Two theories are also examined, namely the "Mechanics of Irregular Warfare" and the "Instrumental Approach." These theories will be applied in the fourth chapter titled "The Surge in Suicide Bombings," which is comprised of my explanations and reinforced by recent scholarly work on this subject.

The third chapter presents a series of alternative explanations for the surge in suicide bombing attacks and ultimately discusses their relative merits or inadequacies. More specifically, the two prominent explanations examined involve the concept of retribution as well as the phenomenon of state-sponsored terrorism. While these alternatives are applicable to current Palestinian terrorism, they do not fully account for the upward trend in suicide attacks.

The fourth chapter examines various components that help explain the increasing reliance on suicide attacks by Palestinian terror groups. Some of these factors, such as the failure of the 2000 Camp David Summit or Israeli leadership under Ariel Sharon, provide the basis for understanding the psyche of the Palestinian extremists. Other factors highlight the actual motives for committing suicide bombings. These include the sophisticated Israeli security strategy which leaves few options for Arab resistance; Hezbollah's "victory" in Southern Lebanon; competition between the various terrorist organizations; and finally, the development of a cult culture obsessed with suicide

bombings due to ideological and psychological stimuli as well as the Palestinian education process.

There are many elements that contribute to these explanations, but four factors are particularly important to emphasize. One factor is that Palestinian groups are progressively more frustrated with their situation: the Palestinian people want to enact change in their lifetime, not in the distant future. As Martha Crenshaw comments, terrorists are particularly "impatient for action."⁹ The fallout from the Camp David talks in 2000 led many Palestinians to the realization that there will be no closure to the conflict any time soon. A call to arms may provide them with a sense of purpose and devotion to their cause, and involvement with terror groups often renders a source of income for the participants and their families.

A second factor is that the Palestinian radicals interpret the willingness of the Israelis to negotiate as a sign of weakness. Any attempt by the Israelis seeking a peaceful resolution is not acceptable to some Palestinians, and they use these attempts as a basis for launching campaigns that invoke fear among the general Israeli population. These terrorists may believe that suicide attacks will force Israel's hand, and they therefore commit these particular attention-grabbing acts as their means of violent diplomacy.

A third factor is the sheer effectiveness of suicide bombings: they are extremely hard to stop or prevent, and they are more successful at taking lives than other terrorist tactics available to the Palestinians. As Alan Dershowitz notes, "Palestinian terrorism is the paradigmatic example of terrorism that works."¹⁰ Considering the security presence in

⁹ Martha Crenshaw, "The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice," Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind, ed. Walter Reich (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998) 7-8.

¹⁰ Alan M. Dershowitz, Why Terrorism Works (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 88.