



There Are Many Reasons Why: Suicide Bombers and Martyrs in Palestine

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There Are Many Reasons Why Suicide Bombers and Martyrs in Palestine

Lori Allen

Customary media depictions of an average suicide bomber driven to self-destruction by despair fail to convince Palestinians. All Palestinians living under occupation, they say, are desperate.

Izz al-Din al-Masri, 23, was considered to be an ordinary fellow, until he went to Jerusalem on August 9, 2001, and blew himself up inside a pizzeria, killing 15 Israelis and injuring scores of others. The montage photo produced for his martyr poster shows him in his early twenties, a bit somber, wearing wireless glasses and a neatly trimmed beard.

"He was a completely average young man," his father insisted. "He worked at my restaurant, was religiously devoted, not too much time for friends."

"We were totally shocked when this happened," a family friend said. "When I saw Izz al-Din's picture on the news, I thought it must be someone who just looks like him. Only one day before I saw him on his bicycle delivering food as always." He seemed happy, his friend recalled. Normal.

In its constant quest for an explanation of how a young man—and recently a few young women—could decide to commit such an act, the Western press has mostly cited fanaticism and despair. Among Palestinians, however, there is no single theory about what makes suicide bombers do what they do, and no firm opinion about their usefulness or morality.

Almost a year after Izz al-Din blew himself up, a huge portrait of the young man decorates the back wall of his family's restaurant in Jenin. While Palestinian dead are always respected and remembered, as in portraits like these, there is ambivalence about suicide attacks after the harshest incursion into Jenin and its refugee camp, which came on the heels of a suicide bombing in Netanya on March 28. Residents of the town were stunned by yet another bomber, days after Israel withdrew from weeks-long incursions into Jenin and other Palestinian areas. "We had just come out of a disaster! And then they go and do this, giving Israel yet another excuse to attack us," one resident complained.

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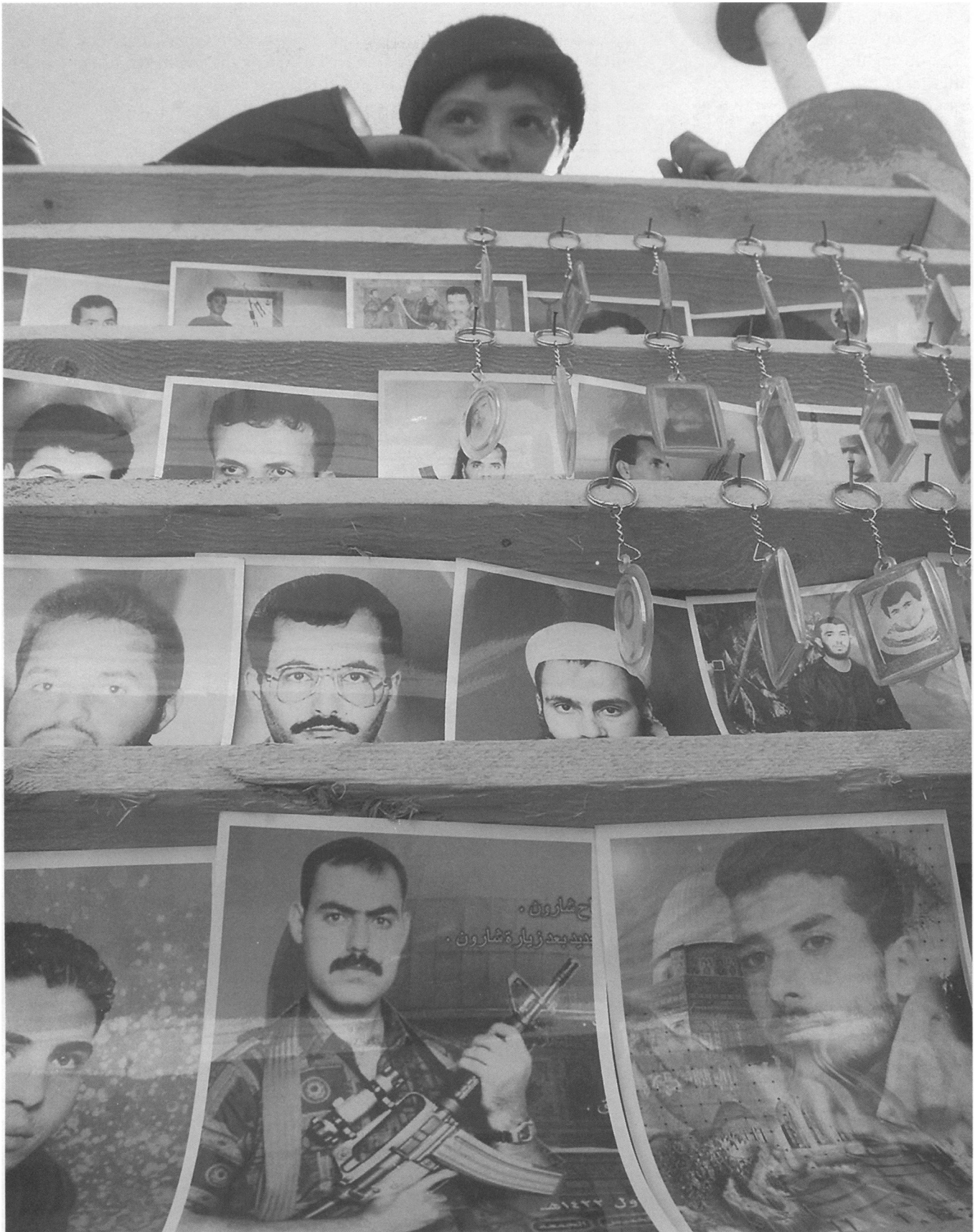
Asked what she expects from the future, what she thinks about martyrdom operations, one young woman whose house was destroyed during the incursions shrugged her shoulders. "It's impossible to judge anything these days. Impossible to make any evaluations."

"It's Normal"

Regardless of its form, resistance to occupation and sacrificing for that struggle are highly praised and everywhere commemorated in Palestine. Everything from streets and hospitals to new babies and children's events are named after martyrs—a term Palestinians use to describe people who have died because of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

The hundreds of martyrs' posters covering the storefronts of West Bank towns provide a palimpsest of the *intifada* dead. With each new Israeli incursion, waves of new posters paper over the tattered remains of old photos, proclaiming with a Qur'anic verse that "the martyr is not dead, but lives on." Shortly after the Israelis withdrew to the outskirts of Jenin, a wall along the Yahya al-Ayyash traffic circle—named after a famous bomb-maker assassinated by Israel—was being pasted over with new posters, including that of another recently assassinated bomb-maker from the town, his political affiliation prominently displayed. Clusters of young men gathered, discussing the martyrs, how they were killed and the kinds of weaponry displayed around them. Others derided the political factions who vie for the right to claim the dead as members of their organizations. "Some of these guys were never political; the factions just want to bolster their own popularity."

These posters represent more than arguments over political membership, however. They also provide succor to those left behind. When Amjad Faraj died of cancer last October, his poster went up all over Deheisha refugee camp, announcing the passing of "the Martyr of Suffering and Political Pris-



Boy looks down at display of martyr paraphernalia in Khan Yunis, Gaza.

CHARLES DHARAPAK/AP PHOTO

oners.” Although he had not died directly as a result of the occupation, he had been injured and imprisoned as an activist during the first *intifada*. Camp residents believed that offering him the status of “martyr” was a way of honoring him, and providing his family solidarity and support.

Some posters of dead children show superimposed images of guns in their hands, a practice not everyone supports. “It’s wrong to show children like that. Children don’t carry guns,” one social worker protests.

But children are part of the *intifada* in many other ways.

Last summer, 12 year-old Reema (not her real name) attended the al-Aqsa Martyrs Summer Camp, so named, she guessed, because the kids there have relatives who are martyrs. Several of the boys at the camp introduced themselves by naming who among their uncles, brothers and fathers had been martyred. The sister of Dia al-Taweel, a young man who blew himself up on a Jerusalem bus, was also at the camp. “She’s fine, normal,” said Reema. “When I hear stories of people being martyred, of course I am sad, but it’s normal.”

Stifled Hopes

That the extraordinary events of the *intifada* have become “normal” in the eyes of children is, in part, a result of sheer repetition. According to local human rights organizations, more than 1,500 Palestinians have been killed, including more than 280 children and 60 suicide bombers, and approximately 20,000 have been injured during the past 20 months. Ongoing closures and internal sieges have kept poverty and unemployment hovering around 50 percent for months, according to the World Food Program.

Palestinians explain that these harsh conditions contribute to the wide support suicide bombers have gained. During the Oslo “peace process,” opinion polls consistently showed majorities of Palestinians opposing “martyrdom operations,” as these attacks are called in Palestine. But since the outbreak of the *intifada*, Israel has stepped up attacks on civilians, mili-

itants, the government and civil infrastructure, stifling Palestinians’ hopes for a better future. Many argue that targeting Israeli civilians in Tel Aviv is the only way to make Israelis notice what their government is doing. They hope that Israeli fear will translate into popular pressure on Prime Minister

Ariel Sharon to get out of the Occupied Territories.

The term “martyrdom operations” connotes respect and honor for the bomber, distinguishing the act from suicide. “It is well-known that Islam forbids suicide,” explains Sheikh Bassam Jarrar, a popular religious leader based in

Ramallah. “Suicide is running away, it is weakness and fear of facing life and its troubles. But martyrdom operations are something else. This phenomenon is known throughout history and it is respected by all nations. People who carry out such attacks are those who are very brave, braver than others.”

In defense of these attacks, many Palestinians insist that there is, in fact, no such thing as an Israeli civilian. Some believe that, due to universal conscription, all Israelis end up in the army. (In fact, many do not serve, including the religiously exempt and conscientious objectors.) Others go even further, asserting that all Israelis are settlers, or at the very least, complicit in the occupation through their support of Sharon. In contrast, there are those, particularly leftists and intellectuals, who reject the killing of civilians on either side. Echoing a view supported by international law, they see Israeli soldiers as entirely legitimate targets.

Fissures in Opinion

At a May 18 conference sponsored by Birzeit University, Mamdouh Nawfal, an adviser to Yasser Arafat, stated that attacks on Israelis inside the 1967 borders “force the Palestinian issue into a dark tunnel, from which it is hard to emerge without strategic losses.” These attacks, Nawfal continued, have weakened the Israeli peace camp and propelled Israeli society to the right. They have also given Ariel Sharon “the excuse to practice his crimes and terrorism against the Palestinians, and caused splits inside Palestinian society.” A few days after the conference, a professor at a Birzeit University symposium echoed Nawfal’s argument. A student countered, “Where was the Israeli left during the first four months of the *intifada*? Before the martyrdom operations started, while our children were being killed?”

Whether or not they have caused internal fissures, bombings inside Israel certainly evoke wide-ranging debate, supported by constantly shifting theories and justifications. Contrary to Nawfal’s warning, many insist that Israel needs no excuses. And when Israel attacks, it kills civilians. Even the most circumspect admit that their opinion of suicide bombs is colored by a desire for revenge: if our women, children and old people are being killed, then so should theirs. A local human rights worker explained his position: “I didn’t support martyrdom attacks be-

“Martyrdom operations” inside Israel evoke wide-ranging debate among Palestinians.

ME COMING SOON!

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fore. But now they must continue, to show Sharon that all his measures have failed. Israelis must understand that withdrawal is the only way to ensure their security."

Other residents of the Jenin camp warned ominously that today's generation of children is growing up in unnatural circumstances. They predicted that Palestinians were eventually going to export their struggle to the root of their troubles—the US. Some cynically observed that Western organizations' support for treating traumatized children is motivated by more than good will.

The Average Bomber

Customary media depictions of an average suicide bomber driven to self-destruction by despair fail to convince Palestinians. All Palestinians living under occupation, they say, are desperate. Many here view this portrayal as a way of denuding the attacks of their political aim: striking back at the Israeli occupation. Under conditions in which getting from point A to point B is increasingly obstructed by an arbitrary power, martyrdom operations are one means of taking back control.

Nor does poverty explain all the attacks. Izz al-Din al-Masri's family is among the wealthiest in the area. His family had been thinking about marrying him off, getting his house built. By contrast, the family of Nidal Abu Shadouf, who exploded himself in the northern Israeli town of Binyamina last July, was barely scraping by.

Sheikh Jarrar suggests that a combination of faith and conviction motivates bombers: "Religion is the factor that creates the bravery in [the suicide bomber] to be a martyr. And religion makes him highly sensitive to the issue of justice. You might be surprised that those people [who carry out the operations] could have fought for Jews if they had known that Jews were oppressed."

But members of leftist, secular organizations have also carried out bombing attacks. Others were newly conscripted into religious parties, including many known for drinking and carousing before having an apparent change of heart.

Jarrar continues, "The idea is not despair. Most of those who carry out operations were university graduates...and they were aware of what they were doing."

There is growing public debate over the negative publicity that results from suicide operations, though not all Palestinians are swayed by the Palestinian Authority's renewed arguments that the attacks hurt their cause. Many dismiss these concerns, saying, "We don't care about world opinion. The world has never helped us anyway."

Palestinians point out that no nation would let itself be occupied without fighting back. In the face of a massive, highly trained and well-equipped Israeli army, and in the absence of an organized army of their own, few feel like they can do anything to control their lives and futures. A common observation here is that Israeli occupation can kill anyone, anytime, whether you're sitting at home watching TV, or out shooting at settlements. At least suicide bombers go out fighting. ■

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