

Suicide Bombing as Strategy and Interaction: The Case of the Second Intifada

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Abstract

Social scientists have explained the rise of suicide bombing since the early 1980s by focusing on the characteristics of suicide bombers, the cultural matrix in which they operate, and the strategic calculations they make to maximize their gains. We offer an alternative approach that emphasizes the interaction between Palestinian suicide bombings and Israeli government actions, analyzing the motivations, organizational rationales and precipitants for the 138 suicide bombings that took place in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza between October 2000 and July 2005. Using several sources, including Arabic newspapers, we find that much of the impetus for Palestinian suicide bombing can be explained by the desire to retaliate against Israeli killings of Palestinians; and that much of the impetus for Israeli killings of Palestinians can be explained by the desire to retaliate for suicide bombings.

When men are angry, they commonly act out of revenge, and not ambition.

– Aristotle, *Politics*

Oppressed people cannot always be expected to behave in a reasonable manner.

– Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah,
spiritual founder of Hizballah

Explaining Suicide Bombing

In April 1993 a suicide bombing took place in the Jordan Valley settlement of Mekhola. It was the first of 20 such attacks over the next four years in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. Between 1993 and 1997 suicide bombers were responsible for the deaths of 175 people (including 21 suicide bombers) and the injury of 928 others. A second and more lethal wave of suicide bombings began on Oct. 26, 2000. By July 12, 2005, suicide bombers were responsible for the deaths of an additional 657 people (including 148 suicide bombers) and the injury of 3,682 others. Table 1 outlines the annual toll and the grim totals. In the early years of the 21st century, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza became the region of the world with the highest frequency of – and the highest per capita death toll due to – suicide bombing.

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Table 1: Suicide Bombings, Deaths and Injuries, 1993-97 and 2000-05

	Attacks	Deaths	Injuries
1993	1	2	7
1994	4	46	118
1995	4	36	211
1996	5	61	185
1997	6	30	407
<i>Subtotal, 1994-97</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>175</i>	<i>928</i>
2000	3	3	6
2001	31	109	1001
2002	57	284	1575
2003	26	169	641
2004	18	81	316
2005 (to 12 July)	3	11	143
<i>Subtotal, 2000-05</i>	<i>138</i>	<i>657</i>	<i>3,682</i>
Total	158	832	4,610

Sources: *al-Quds* (2000-05); *al-Quds al-‘Arabi* (2000-05); International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (2004); Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2004); Johnston (2003); *New York Times* (2005).

Social scientists have sought to explain the growing incidence of suicide bombing in the past quarter of a century by focusing on the alleged psychopathology of suicide bombers, the deprivations they supposedly experience, the religious *milieux* from which they presumably originate, and the degree to which suicide bombing serves their strategic interests. Let us critically examine each of these arguments.

Psychopathology

In the late 19th century social scientists first proposed that an irrational or pathological state of mind typically precipitates collective violence (Le Bon 1969 [1895]: 28). Since then, that idea seems to have been repeated in the aftermath of nearly every major eruption of collective violence against authority, suicide bombings included (Reich 1990). For example, immediately following the suicide bombings of American and French military barracks in Beirut in 1983, psychologists characterized the bombers as “unstable individuals with a death wish,” although they lacked any evidence, clinical or anecdotal, of the bombers’ state of mind (Perina 2002). Similarly, following the Sept. 11, 2001 suicide attacks on the United States, U.S. government and media interpretations underscored the supposed irrationality and even outright insanity of the bombers, again without the benefit of corroborating data (Atran 2003: 1535-6).

Despite such claims, interviews with prospective suicide bombers and reconstructions of the biographies of successful suicide bombers do not suggest a higher rate of psychopathology than in the general population (Davis 2003; Reuter 2004; Stern 2003; Victor 2003). A recent study of all 462 suicide bombers who attacked targets worldwide between 1980 and 2003 found not a single case of psychopathology (depression, psychosis, past suicide attempts, etc.) among them and only one case (a Chechen female) of probable mental

retardation (Pape 2005: 210). Evidence collected by other experts suggests that “recruits who display signs of pathological behaviour are automatically weeded out for reasons of organizational security.” (Taarnby 2003:18) It seems reasonable to conclude that individualistic explanations based on psychopathology are of no value in helping us understand the rising incidence of suicide bombing.

Deprivation

Another explanation of suicide bombing focuses on the extraordinary deprivations, either absolute or relative, that suicide bombers supposedly suffer. Absolute deprivation refers to longstanding poverty and unemployment, relative deprivation to the growth of an intolerable gap between expectations and rewards (Gurr 1970; Moore 2003). Presumably, deprivation of one sort or the other frustrates some categories of people until they are driven to commit self-immolating acts of aggression against the perceived source of their suffering.

Evidence does not support the deprivation theory. One researcher found education and income data on about 30 percent of Arab suicide bombers between 1980 and 2003. He reported that they were much better educated than the populations from which they were recruited. They were typically from the working and middle classes and were seldom unemployed or poor (Pape 2005: 213-15). Another scholar discovered that suicide bombers from Egypt and Saudi Arabia have come mainly from middle- or upper-middle-class families (Laqueur 2004: 16). As is well known, the perpetrators of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the United States were well educated, middle-class men. Such evidence lends no credence to the notion that suicide bombers are especially deprived in any absolute sense.

Arguments about relative deprivation are purely speculative. To date, no researcher has measured the degree to which suicide bombers are relatively deprived and compared their level of relative deprivation with that of non-suicide bombers. However, efforts to construct socio-demographic profiles of suicide bombers are of some relevance to the theory. In the 1990s profilers discovered that suicide bombers in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza tended to be single, socially marginal, unemployed or underemployed men in their mid-20s with a deep attachment to Islamic fundamentalism – just the sort of individuals some people might expect to experience deprivation most keenly and react to it most violently. Israeli authorities subsequently used this information to disrupt suicide operations and prevent individuals matching the profile from entering the country. Insurgent organizations then started recruiting university graduates, married men, people with a secular background, women and youths as suicide bombers. For example, our data show that between 2000 and 2004, the percentage of female Palestinian suicide bombers rose from zero to 12 percent of the total. As the socio-demographic profile of suicide bombers came to resemble that of the Palestinian population as a whole, it became more difficult to sustain the hypothesis that suicide bombers are especially relatively deprived. And in fact the consensus in the literature today is that there are no ideal typical suicide bombers whose socio-demographic characteristics lead them to experience extraordinarily high levels of deprivation, either relative or absolute (Stern 2003: 50-2; Taarnby 2003: 10-12; Victor 2003).

Culture

The idea that culture, especially religion, influences behavior net of other causes dates back to Max Weber's classic essay on the subject (Weber 1958 [1904-5]). Accordingly, in the late 1980s, some social scientists began to attribute much of the collective violence in the world

to a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West (for syntheses, see Huntington 1996 and Lewis 2002; and for a sustained critique, Hunter 1998). From their point of view, Islamic culture inclines Muslims to fanatic hatred of the West, violence, and in the extreme case, suicide attacks. For example, the martyrdom of Hussein at the battle of Karbala in 680 C.E. was a signal event in Islamic history and it is often said to have reinforced the readiness of Muslims, especially Shiites, to sacrifice their lives for the collective good in the face of overwhelming odds (Reuter 2004: 37-9).

While such cultural resources likely increase the probability that some groups will engage in suicide attacks, one must be careful not to exaggerate their significance. One difficulty with the “clash of civilizations” argument is that public opinion polls show that Arabs in the Middle East hold strongly favorable attitudes toward American science and technology, freedom and democracy, education, movies and television, and largely favorable attitudes toward the American people. They hold strongly negative attitudes only toward American Middle East policy (Zogby 2002). This is less evident of a clash of civilizations than a deep political disagreement. The notion that an elective affinity exists between Islam and suicide bombing is not supported by the fact that “much of the so-called Islamic behaviour that the West terms terrorism is outside the norms that Islam holds for political violence.” (Silverman 2002: 91) One must also bear in mind that some secular Palestinian groups (e.g., the nationalist Fatah and the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) and some non-Muslim groups (e.g., the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka) have employed suicide bombing as a tactic. Among the 83 percent of suicide attackers between 1980 and 2003 for whom data on ideological background is available, only a minority – 43 percent – was religious (Pape 2005: 210). According to one analyst, even in Lebanon, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza between 1981 and 2003, fewer than half of suicide missions were conducted by religious individuals (Ricolfi 2005). This hardly increases confidence in the view that religion in general or Islamic fundamentalism in particular is the wellspring of suicide bombing. A final difficulty with cultural interpretations is that suicide attacks are by no means a constant in Islamic history. They appear in 11th century northern Persia, in the 18th century in parts of India, Indonesia and the Philippines, and in the late 20th century in various parts of the Muslim world. The episodic nature of suicide attacks suggests that certain social and political circumstances may be decisive in determining which cultural resources are drawn upon at a given time to formulate tactics for collective violence. For example, in the 18th century, suicide attacks were chosen as a tactic because little else proved effective against vastly militarily superior European and American colonial powers (Dale 1988). Similarly, militant Islamic groups in the late 20th and early 21st centuries adopted suicide bombing as a tactic only after other tactics had failed. Suicide bombing, it seems, is a weapon of last resort. All of this points to the difficulty of trying to explain political variables with cultural constants.

Strategic Choice

A major advance in thinking about suicide bombing took place when scholars began to analyze it as a strategically rational political action (Harrison 2003; Madsen 2004; Sprinzak 2000). With the recent publication of Robert Pape’s study of all 462 suicide bombers who attacked targets worldwide between 1980 and 2003, this school of thought was given a strong empirical basis of support (Pape 2003, 2005).

The core of Pape’s argument is that “... every group mounting a suicide campaign over the past two decades has had as a major objective – or its central objective – coercing a foreign state that has military forces in what the terrorists see as their homeland to take those forces out.” (Pape 2005: 21; cf. Laqueur 2004: 19) Pape makes his case by first quoting the leaders

of Hizballah, Hamas, al-Qa'ida and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam on their organization's goals. These leaders stated plainly and forcefully that their chief aim is to liberate, respectively, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and the eastern and northern provinces of Sri Lanka from what they regard as foreign occupation or control (Pape 2005: 29-33). To support his contention that suicide bombing is a fundamentally rational strategy, Pape then notes that suicide attacks are not randomly distributed but occur in clusters as part of a campaign by an organized group to achieve a political goal. He identifies 18 suicide bombing campaigns that have taken place since the early 1980s, five of them, including the second *intifada*, ongoing (Pape 2005: 40). Finally, Pape argues that the rationality of suicide bombing is evident in the correlation between the increasing use of suicide bombing campaigns and their relative success in achieving their goals. He finds that suicide bombing has a roughly 50 percent success rate and regards that as high, since, by comparison, international military and economic coercion achieves its goals less than a third of the time (Pape 2005: 65). In short, Pape claims that strategic rationality is evident in the timing, objectives and results of suicide bombing campaigns.

Pape's analysis convinces us that many cases of suicide bombing are not devoid of strategic logic. However, our analysis of the second *intifada* – one of the three most persistent and violent series of suicide bombing attacks in the past quarter of a century¹ – leads us to conclude that characterizing suicide bombing as strategically rational is an oversimplification. Specifically:

1. We have found that suicide bombing is an action that typically involves mixed motivations and mixed organizational rationales. Strategic thinking is only one element that may combine with others in the creation of a suicide bomber. It predominates in the explosive admixture that results in a suicide attack less frequently than Pape leads us to believe.

2. Because the motivations and organizational rationales of suicide bombings are often mixed, suicide bombing campaigns are not always or even often timed to maximize the strategic advantages of insurgents. The timing of suicide bombings may be detached from strategic considerations because they take place for nonstrategic reasons such as revenge or retaliation or simply when opportunities for attack happen to emerge. As a result, their timing may not maximize the strategic gains of the attackers and on some occasions may even minimize such gains.

3. Suicide bombing campaigns sometimes encourage targets to make minor concessions, but they often fail to achieve their main objectives and they sometimes have consequences that are the opposite of those intended by suicide attackers and their organizations. If suicide bombing pays, as Pape claims, its net returns are often meager and sometimes negative.

Method, Variables, Data

To substantiate our arguments, we collected data on 128 variables pertaining to the use of insurgent and state violence in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza from Oct. 26, 2000 (the date of the second *intifada*'s first suicide bombing) to July 12, 2005 (the second *intifada*'s last suicide

bombing as of this writing). Data were collected from the online database of the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) in Herzliya, Israel; the website of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the East Coast evening edition of the *New York Times*; and two authoritative Arabic newspapers – *al-Quds*, published in Jerusalem, and *al-Quds al-Arabi*, published in London.

We define suicide bombing as the use of explosives against one or more people by one or more attackers. The attackers enjoy organizational support and know in advance and with certainty that their actions will result in their deaths. By our definition, merely planning an attack does not qualify as a suicide bombing; the attacker must be *en route* to his or her target. Nor is death or injury a necessary part of our definition since on occasion a suicide bomber is apprehended and disarmed after an attack has been launched but before detonation. Three suicide bombings listed by Israeli sources do not qualify as such by our definition. Fourteen suicide bombings by our definition are not listed as such by Israeli sources.

Aside from the cases just mentioned, we found no discrepancies between Arab and Israeli sources with regard to the date, time and location of suicide attacks, the number of deaths and injuries they caused, the number of suicide bombers involved in each attack, and the age and gender of the suicide bombers. Our review of Arabic newspapers found 10 cases in which Israeli sources incorrectly list the name or residence of the suicide bomber.

Israeli sources and the *New York Times* provide only sporadic information on the individual motives, organizational rationales and precipitants of suicide attacks. Here we relied more heavily on Arabic sources because they provide more consistent and detailed evidence drawn from interviews with organizational leaders and suicide bombers' family members, official organizational statements, and statements made by suicide bombers before their attacks.

Because we discuss only the objectives, timing and results of suicide bombing in this paper, we focus mainly on 12 variables here: the (1) year, (2) month and (3) day of each suicide attack; the (4) primary, (5) secondary and (6) tertiary motives of the suicide bomber(s); the (7) primary, (8) secondary and (9) tertiary rationales for the suicide bombing according to the organization(s) claiming responsibility for it; and the (10) primary, (11) secondary and (12) tertiary precipitants that, according to the responsible organizations(s), prompted the suicide attack.

Motives are the reasons suicide bombers gave for their actions in statements they made prior to attacking. When such statements were unavailable, we turned to published statements of family members and friends or, in their absence, published statements of organizational representatives.

We found five types of motives for suicide attacks:

1. *Desire for personal revenge or retaliation due to an Israeli action against the suicide bomber or his or her relatives or friends*
2. *Desire for national revenge or retaliation due to an Israeli action against Palestinians in general*
3. *Desire for religious revenge or retaliation due to an Israeli action against Muslims or Islam*
4. *Desire to regain one's reputation due to the suicide bomber having engaged in shameful behavior, such as collaboration with the enemy*
5. *Desire to achieve a religious goal other than revenge or retaliation, such as the defense or spread of Islam*

Organizational rationales are the reasons that representatives of organizations claiming responsibility for suicide attacks gave for their actions. Organizational rationales are not ultimate

goals. The ultimate goals of insurgent Palestinian organizations are to recapture territory perceived as their members' homeland and, for some organizations, to establish Islam as the official religion of that territory. Many strategies and tactics may be adopted to achieve these goals, suicide bombing among them. Rationales, in contrast, are the reasons organizational leaders give for undertaking specific suicide missions. Sometimes rationales and ultimate goals are identical but usually they are not. We found five types of rationales for suicide attacks:

- 1. Desire for organizational revenge or retaliation – due, for example, to an Israeli attack on the organization's leaders, activists, sites or offices*
- 2. Desire for national revenge or retaliation – due, for example, to an Israeli attack against Palestinians who are not members of the organization claiming responsibility for the attack*
- 3. Desire to achieve a tactical (i.e., specific, short-term) political goal, such as disrupting security cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian authorities*
- 4. Desire to achieve a strategic (i.e., general, long-term) political goal, such as forcing Israel to withdraw from occupied territories*
- 5. Desire to achieve a religious goal, such as the defense or spread of Islam*

Precipitants are the specific preceding events that affected the timing of suicide bombings according to representatives of organizations claiming responsibility for the attacks. We found five types of precipitants:

- 1. Assassination of organizational leaders or members by Israel*
- 2. Killing of Palestinians other than organizational leaders or members by Israel*
- 3. Anti-Palestinian actions by Israel not involving the killing of Palestinians, such as house demolitions*
- 4. Significant political events such as an Israeli election, the visit of an American envoy or an Arab summit meeting*
- 5. Symbolically significant religious or ideological events, such as the anniversary of Salah al-Din's retaking of Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187 C.E.*

We collected information on primary, secondary and tertiary motives, rationales and precipitants, judging salience on the basis of how prominently these precursors of suicidal violence figured in the reports we surveyed.

Coding was conducted by this paper's junior author, a PhD. sociology student who is fluent in English and Arabic. A research assistant (also with a graduate education and fluency in English and Arabic) also was trained to code the materials. We drew a random sample of 5 percent of the days on which suicide bombings took place between Oct. 26, 2000 and July 12,

2005, and the research assistant independently coded the materials for these days. The research assistant's coding was then compared with that of the junior author. We found only a few minor differences between the two codings. This gives us confidence in the reliability of our measures.

Analysis

Timing

Pape defines a suicide bombing campaign as "... an intended series of attacks... aimed at gaining political concessions from a target government. A campaign... continues until the terrorist leaders deliberately abandon it, either because sufficient gains have been made or because the leaders believe that the effort has failed." (Pape 2005: 39-40) Accordingly, Pape divides the suicide bombings that took place in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza between 1994 and 1997 into four campaigns lasting one to 10 months each. Inexplicably, however, he regards the second *intifada* as a single suicide bombing campaign although it had dragged on for 55 months as of this writing and had sustained numerous periods of intense suicide bombing activity as well as extended lulls, some lasting longer than the time between campaigns (as defined by Pape) in the 1990s. According to Pape, suicide bombing campaigns are strategically timed to maximize the advantages of insurgent groups. To test his argument, one would need to measure and explain variation over time in the frequency of suicide attacks. Eliminating all such variation by lumping many peaks and troughs under the rubric of a single campaign obscures the very data required to test his argument rigorously.

Figure 1 highlights the data hidden by Pape's classification of the second *intifada* as a single campaign. The 10-day moving average of the frequency of suicide attacks varies from zero to .8 attacks per day. Understandably, the peaks – especially those with values of half the maximum or more (i.e., .4 or greater) – first capture one's attention. There were 11 such peak periods of suicide bombing during the second *intifada*. The fact that 10 of them appear in the upper left quadrant of Figure 1 means that all but one took place during the second *intifada*'s first half. The mean duration of the 11 peak periods was a mere 4.9 days; cumulatively, they lasted just 3.1 percent of the days in the series. Nonetheless, these peak periods of suicide bombing account for 19.7 percent of injuries, 21.6 percent of deaths and 41.3 percent of total attacks. They were staccato bursts of extraordinary cumulative lethality.

Peak periods sometimes involved the coordinated activities of several insurgent organizations (Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, etc.) and were in that sense "national" campaigns. In terms of precipitants, motives and organizational rationales, however, we lack sufficient data to determine exactly how peak periods differ from other periods.² Until such data become available, we must restrict ourselves to the more general task of explaining variation in the frequency of suicide attacks using our content analysis of newspapers and suicide bombing databases.

Table 2 provides insight into the timing of suicide attacks. It focuses on the precipitants of suicide bombings – the specific preceding events that affected the timing of suicide bombings according to representatives of organizations claiming responsibility for them. For ease of interpretation, we divided precipitants into two broad categories: reactive and proactive. *Reactive precipitants are Israeli actions that elicited a Palestinian reaction in the form of a suicide attack.* Such actions include the assassination of organizational leaders and

Figure 1. Frequency of Suicide Bombings, 10-Day Moving Average, Oct. 26, 2000-July 12, 2005

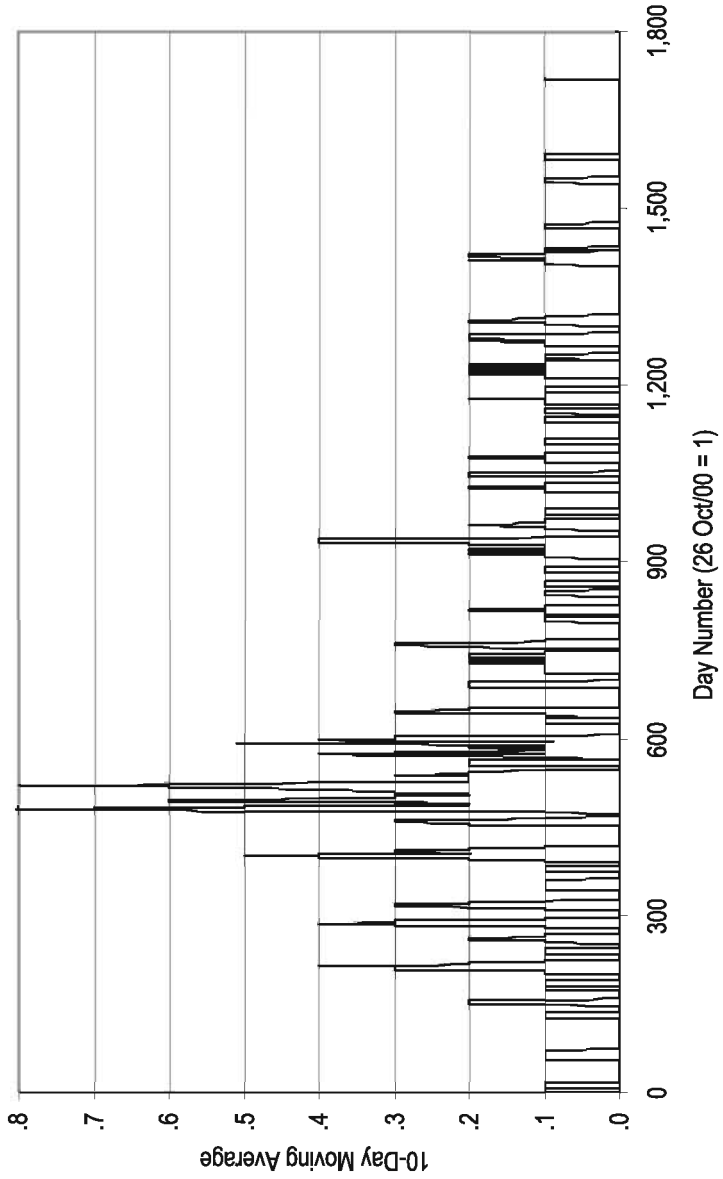


Table 2: Precipitants of Suicide Bombings

Reactive Precipitants	
Assassination of organizational leaders	34
Killing of Palestinians other than organizational leaders	30
Other Israeli actions not involving killing	18
Proactive Precipitants	
Significant political events	13
Significant religious or ideological events	5
Total	100
N	106

Note: This table combines primary, secondary and tertiary rationales.

members, the killing of Palestinians other than organizational leaders and members, and other actions not involving killing, such as the demolition of houses owned by the families of people involved in anti-Israel activities. *Proactive precipitants are political, religious or ideological events that elicited a suicide attack without provocation by specific Israeli actions.* In such cases, organizations used symbolically significant anniversaries, elections or negotiations as opportunities to further their goals by means of suicide attacks.

Fully 82 percent of the 106 precipitants that we identified were reactive, just 18 percent proactive. The great majority of suicide attacks were precipitated by specific Israeli actions. Their timing was in that sense not of the Palestinians' choosing. To be sure, Israel's response influenced the ease with which suicide attacks could be mounted. Especially after the extraordinarily frequent and lethal suicide missions of March 2002, Israel's actions (including the construction of a wall with electronic sensors and television cameras cordoning off much of the West Bank from Israel) significantly decreased the number of suicide bombings and increased the time between precipitant and reactive attacks. Still, even during the *intifada's* less bloody second half, suicide bombings were often precipitated by Israeli actions. For example, the suicide bombing in Beersheba on Aug. 31, 2004 was declared to be a response to the assassinations of Hamas leaders Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and Abdel Aziz Rantisi, but those assassinations occurred, respectively, four and five months earlier. In contrast, insurgent response time at the beginning of the *intifada* was typically no longer than three weeks, often less.

Thus, our finding suggests an interpretation for the timing of suicide attacks that is widely at variance with Pape's. We find little evidence to support his contention that suicide attacks are timed to maximize the achievement of strategic or tactical goals. Our analysis of precipitants leads us to conclude that most suicide bombings were revenge or retaliatory attacks and were advertised as such by insurgents.

Objectives

Pape claims that not just the timing but also the objectives of suicide attacks reveal a strategic logic. In his view, suicide bombing is aimed at achieving specific political goals, notably coercing an occupying power to end its occupation. We certainly found such logic when we examined the individual motivations and organizational rationales for suicide attacks during the second *intifada*. We also discovered that it figures less prominently than Pape would have us believe.

Table 3 divides the individual motivations for suicide bombing into the now-familiar reactive and proactive categories. Although we were able to find information on the

motivations of only a minority of suicide bombers in published sources, some 71 percent of the motivations we recorded were reactive and 30 percent proactive. (The percentages do not equal 100 because of rounding.) Revenge and retaliation figured prominently in the suicide attackers' vocabulary of motives. For the most part, they gave up their lives to avenge the killing of a close relative, as retribution for specific attacks against the Palestinian people or as payback for perceived attacks against Islam. This finding supports the educated but impressionistic conclusion that political philosopher Avishai Margalit reached:

Having talked to many Israelis and Palestinians who know something about the bombers, and having read and watched many of the bombers' statements, my distinct impression is that the main motive of many of the suicide bombers is revenge for acts committed by Israelis, a revenge that will be known and celebrated in the Islamic world (Margalit 2003).

Table 3: Motivations for Suicide Bombings

Reactive Motivations	
Personal revenge or retaliation	23
National revenge or retaliation	46
Religious revenge or retaliation	2
Proactive Motivations	
To regain reputation	5
Religious	25
Total	101
N	57

Note: This table combines primary, secondary and tertiary motivations. The total percent does not equal 100 due to rounding.

In fairness, Pape's argument is pitched mainly at the organizational level. He holds that all manner of motivations may prompt individual suicide bombers to attack, but organizations tend overwhelmingly to operate in a calculated, strategic way. To test his argument, we read what organizational representatives had to say about their rationales for suicide attacks. Thirteen percent of the 165 rationales that we identified mentioned long-term strategic goals such as ending the Israeli occupation. Another 21 percent mentioned short-term tactical goals such as disrupting security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Seven percent mentioned that suicide bombings were calculated to achieve religious goals – in particular, the defense or spread of Islam. But this still leaves a substantial majority of rationales – 59 percent – that fall into the reactive category. Even at the organizational level, where, according to Pape, calculated, strategic considerations govern action, we find that six out of 10 rationales focused on avenging Israeli attacks on insurgent organizations and the Palestinian people or retaliating for such attacks in order to maintain organizational morale. To be sure, the organizations responsible for suicide attacks are governed by a higher level of strategic logic than are the suicide bombers themselves. It is nonetheless misleading to make the wholesale claim that predominantly strategic considerations regarding the re-conquest of territory

Table 4: Rationales for Suicide Bombings

Reactive Rationales	
Organizational revenge or retaliation	22
National revenge or retaliation	37
Proactive Rationales	
Tactical	21
Strategic	13
Religious	7
Total	100
N	165

Note: This table combines primary, secondary and tertiary rationales.

underlie suicide bombings. Whether we examine the timing or the objectives of suicide attacks, the reality is more complex.

Results

Pape’s third assertion is that suicide bombing is strategically rational in the sense that it often pays. In his view, organizations engage in suicide bombing because it helps them achieve their strategic goals relatively efficiently – with a comparatively high rate of success in terms of achieving strategic goals, little financial cost and minimal loss of life on the side of the insurgents. Here Pape echoes the common view that Palestinian insurgents must invest just \$150 in supplies and travel costs plus a single human life to wreak havoc in Israeli society and achieve their goals.

To sustain the argument that suicide bombings cost little, one must ignore many of the substantial costs incurred by Palestinians for their actions. For example, in response to suicide bombings, Israel routinely assassinates top organizational leaders (often causing collateral deaths of associates and family members in the process) and imprisons and tortures second-tier leaders. Insurgent organizations such as Hamas get branded as terrorist organizations internationally and find their bank accounts frozen. These retaliatory actions are entirely predictable and they undermine the capacity of insurgent organizations to act. We conclude that the costs to insurgents of suicide bombings are in fact substantial, yet high costs fail to prevent some Palestinians from engaging in suicide attacks.

Pape’s claim that suicide bombing achieves a relatively high rate of success in terms of achieving strategic goals is also highly questionable in our judgment. Pape defines success as the withdrawal of occupying forces. The second *intifada* witnessed just one such withdrawal – Israel’s August/September 2005 pullout from Gaza. Can the pullout be construed as a consequence of Palestinian suicide attacks? That is certainly the view of Hamas and other insurgent organizations. Hamas’s official statement following the Gaza pullout included the telling phrase, “Four years of resistance surpassed 10 years of bargaining.” And in early September 2005, the “general leader” of Hamas’s military wing, Muhammad Deif, said to his comrades that “without... your love of martyrdom, the liberation of Gaza could not have been achieved.” (Palestinian Information Center, our translation)

Yet an examination of the geographical location of suicide bombings and the geographical origin of the bombers themselves casts doubt on this interpretation. During the second *intifada*, Gaza was neither the site of a disproportionately large number of suicide attacks nor the recruiting ground for a disproportionately large number of suicide bombers. Only 18 percent of all suicide attacks took place in Gaza, the same percentage as in the West Bank. Nearly two-thirds of suicide attacks took place in Israel proper (see Table 5). Only 26 percent of suicide bombers came from Gaza compared to 72 percent from the West Bank. The number of West Bank suicide bombers per million residents was 1.7 times higher than the number of Gazan suicide bombers per million residents. (For population data, see Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2005a.) A mere two of the 84 suicide bombers who carried out missions in Israel proper came from Gaza. Eighty came from the West Bank. Thus, if suicide attacks were a decisive factor in leading to territorial concessions, one would expect those concessions to have been made in the West Bank, not Gaza.

Table 5: Geographical Location of Suicide Attacks and Geographical Origin of Suicide Bombers

Region	Percent of bombers	Bombers per million Palestinians	Percent of bombings
West Bank	72	30	18
Gaza	26	18	18
Israel proper	1		64
Other	1		0
Total	100		100
N	86		137

This is not to suggest that suicide bombing had no effect on Israeli actions. It did. As often as not, however, the effect was the opposite of what was intended by insurgents. Palestinian moderates want Israeli public opinion to soften, leading Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza. Extremists want to create deep rifts in Israeli society and to destroy Israel as a Jewish state. Suicide bombing cannot be construed as an instrumentally rational means of achieving any of these objectives (cf. Elster 2005; Weber 1947: 115-18). Thus, following four and a half years of suicide attacks, a 2005 BBC poll of 68 countries found that Israeli Jews have by far the strongest national identity in the world and are more likely than people in other countries to trust their military and police leaders and want their military leaders to have more power (BBC News 2005). Israeli polls demonstrate that suicide attacks helped hardliner Ariel Sharon win the February 2001 election and, in general, drove Israeli public opinion to the right throughout the second *intifada* (Arian 2001, 2002; Eldar 2005; Elran 2006). Suicide bombings also encouraged Israel to reoccupy Palestinian population centers in the West Bank and Gaza in 2002. Israel had withdrawn from these population centers in 1995-97 as a result of negotiations culminating in the 1993 Oslo Accords. But in March 2002, 135 Israeli civilians were killed in suicide attacks, the most infamous of which was the so-called Passover massacre at the Park Hotel in Netanya, in which 30 Israelis lost their lives. Within 24 hours of the Passover massacre, Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield. Twenty thousand reservists were called up in the biggest mobilization since the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the biggest military operation in the West Bank and Gaza since the 1967 war. The West Bank and Gaza were almost completely reoccupied within weeks. Even if the strategic aim of the suicide bombings in March was purely to coerce Israel to withdraw completely from the occupied territories (however defined), the result of those attacks was just the opposite.³ On a broader canvas, we note that substantial West Bank territory has been incorporated on the Israeli side of the wall that Israel is building to make it harder to launch suicide attacks. Therefore, in the long run, too, suicide bombings will

have made it more difficult for the Palestinians to gain territorial concessions from Israel. Of course, many Palestinians recognize that suicide bombing is a problematic strategy that rarely achieves strategic territorial goals and often has unintended, negative consequences. Among them is Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who characteristically declared the July 12, 2005 suicide bombing in Netanya "a crime against our people." (Al-Ra'is 2005)

In sum, we conclude that, during the second *intifada*, the results, objectives and precipitants of suicide bombing reveal little of the strategic logic that, according to Pape, lies at its core.

A Model of the Determinants of Suicide Bombing

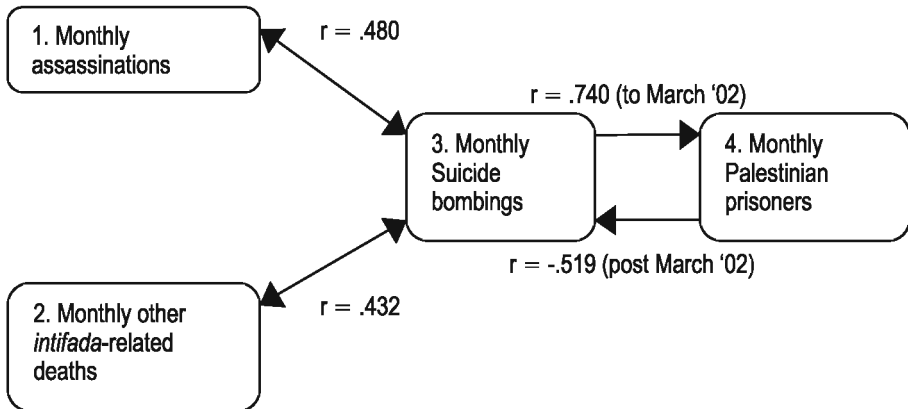
We have crudely modeled the deadly interaction between Palestinians and Israelis in Figure 2. We hypothesize that suicide bombings prompted Israel to take a variety of measures against insurgents, such as the assassination of Palestinian insurgents. In turn, assassinations led Palestinian insurgents to engage in more suicide bombing.⁴ This positive reciprocal relationship is signified by the double-headed arrow linking variables 1 and 3. Suicide bombings also prompted Israel to take anti-insurgent measures other than assassinations, such as armed incursions. These operations also resulted in the death of Palestinians; and the killing of Palestinians by methods other than assassination led to more suicide bombings. This positive reciprocal relationship is signified by the double-headed arrow linking variables 2 and 3. Finally, suicide bombings prompted Israel to imprison a growing number of Palestinian insurgents (3 → 4). After March 2002, however, when Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield, so many insurgents were imprisoned that the operation of their organizations was negatively affected and the frequency of suicide bombings decreased (4 → 3). Consequently, we expect the direction of the relationship to have shifted from positive to negative after March 2002.

Due to its complexity, properly fitting data to our model would require another paper.⁶ Accordingly, we restrict ourselves here to illustrating the plausibility of the model by showing bivariate correlations between pairs of variables for aggregated monthly data. All the bivariate correlations shown in Figure 2 are moderately strong to strong. All are statistically significant at the .001 level or lower and their direction is consistent with our theory, although, of course, they in no sense confirm it.

Toward an Interactive Approach

In the planning offices of the Israeli security services as in the warrens of Gaza City, highly intelligent men strategize about how to maximize gains and minimize losses in the most recent phase of their 125-year battle over territory that both sides claim as their historical and religious birthright. One side is too weak to imagine a balance of power, so instead it concocts a scheme to achieve a balance of horror, justified by the idea that, "A nation whose sons vie with each other for the sake of martyrdom does not know defeat." (quoted in Oliver and Steinberg, 2005: 61) The powerful side responds to martyrdom operations as most of its enraged population demands – by teaching the other side a series of lessons it won't soon forget. The weak side obliges by remembering well and avenging its losses with all the fury it can muster. Some of the strategic thinkers in the Israeli planning offices undoubtedly recognize that murderous retribution is often counterproductive. They must, however, answer to their political bosses, who are in turn obliged to respond to public outrage by getting tough. Some of the strategic thinkers in the warrens of Gaza City undoubtedly know that Israel will not capitulate in response to suicide bombing. But they must answer to their publics too, and so they often forsake the calculation of costs and benefits for political expediency and a culture of mutual destruction. Hence our conclusion that

Figure 2: A Model of the Determinants of Suicide Bombing



Note: This model shows bivariate correlations between pairs of variables, all of which are statistically significant at the .001 level or lower. The correlation between assassinations and suicide bombings includes only bombings in which an assassination was mentioned as a precipitant. The correlation between other *intifada*-related deaths and suicide bombings includes only bombings in which other *intifada*-related deaths were mentioned as a precipitant. Together, these bombings account for 68 of the 106 precipitants on which we have information (see Table 2). Neither the monthly number of house demolitions nor the monthly number of Palestinians injured due to the second *intifada* are associated with the monthly number of suicide bombings.

Data sources: Suicide bombings and Israeli assassinations (attempted and successful) of Palestinian members of insurgent organizations: *al-Quds* (2000-05); *al-Quds al-'Arabi* (2000-05); Palestinian deaths due to the second *intifada*: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2005b); Palestinian prisoners in the Israeli prison system: Israel Defense Forces (2005) and Israeli Prison Service (2005).

retribution and retaliation often trump strategic calculation in prompting suicide attacks.

Our analysis also points to the interactive nature of suicide bombing and the necessity of understanding its relationship to other forms of collective violence perpetrated by states and non-state organizations (cf. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Tilly 2003). Any protracted conflict involving suicide bombing is marked by periods of intense violence and periods of relative calm. It features a complex cast of actors whose identities, goals, strategies, friends and enemies change over time. It involves a repertoire of tactics other than suicide bombing (assassinations, armed incursions by state forces, the imposition of curfews and restrictions on freedom of movement, land grabs, guerrilla attacks, strikes, mass demonstrations, etc.), the use of any one of which may make the use of others more or less likely (Lichbach 1987). To adequately explain the emergence of suicide bombing as a political tactic and culturally acceptable practice and account for variations over time in its use, one must do justice to the complex dynamism of a conflict like the second *intifada* by bringing all these actors, identities, coalitions, and tactics into the picture. Here we have only scratched the surface.

Notes

1. When Pape's book went to press, only al-Qa'ida's campaign against the United States, which began in 1996, had lasted longer than the second *intifada*. Since Pape's book went to press, the incidence of suicide bombings by Iraqi insurgents has exceeded by far the

incidence of suicide attacks during the second *intifada*. For a good journalistic overview of the second *intifada*, see Harel and Isacharoff (2004) and for social scientific studies, see Hafez (2005) and Moghadam (2003).

2. There were 57 suicide bombings during peak periods. In our content analysis of newspapers and suicide-bombing databases we found peak-period data on the individual motives of two bombers, on the precipitants of ten bombings, and on the organizational rationales of 28 bombings. Ricolfi (2005: 98-101) attributes spikes in the frequency of suicide bombing to competition among insurgent organizations but, oddly, he defines cooperation as a form of competition. Like Ricolfi, we have noted that inter-organizational cooperation seems to be associated with spikes in the frequency of suicide bombing but we see no reason to view this as a form of competitive outbidding. For a critique of the outbidding thesis, see Brym and Araj (2006).
3. The decisive factor determining how an occupying power will be affected by suicide bombings and other such attacks is its level of commitment to the territory in question. It took a single set of train bombings to get Spanish forces out of Iraq in 2004 but the West Bank is not Iraq and Israel is not Spain.
4. We define assassinations as Israeli actions intended to kill specific Palestinians on the grounds that they conducted anti-Israel activities during the second *intifada*. Ricolfi (2005: 126-8) argues for the asymmetry of the relationship between suicide bombing and Israeli counterterrorism in the period 2000-03. He shows that the correlation between suicide missions and Israeli military operations one week later is strong and statistically significant while the correlation between Israeli military operations and suicide bombings one week later is weak and statistically insignificant. However, his correlations are deceiving because suicide bombings have precipitants other than Israeli military operations, as we have shown. As Figure 2 indicates, we found positive and statistically significant relationships when we specified the type of precipitant but we chose not to lag variables because our data are monthly aggregates and the time between event and reaction is often less than a month. We also found a modest positive correlation ($r = .214$, sig. $< .001$) between (1) the monthly number of suicide bombings attributable to each insurgent organization (Hamas, Islamic Jihad, al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade and other) and (2) the monthly number of assassinations of each organization's members.
5. We would have to conduct a regression analysis using a Poisson or negative-binomial generalized linear model showing reciprocal effects and taking serial dependency into account.

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