

4-15-2012

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**My Body is a Barrel of Gunpowder:
Palestinian Women's Suicide Bombing in the
Second Intifada**

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A Senior Honors Thesis

in Global Studies

Presented to the Faculties of Carnegie Mellon University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors

April 15, 2012

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Abstract

The suicide-bombing by Wafa Idris in an Israeli grocery store on January 27, 2002, killing one Israeli, created excitement in the media over the perceived new phenomenon of Palestinian female suicide bombers. Palestinian women's political and even violent participation in the national campaign is not, however, new. In fact, Palestinian female suicide bombing falls within the continuum of women's political participation in the Palestinian struggle against Zionism and Israel. Many scholars have put forth gendered theories to explain the emergence of Palestinian female suicide bombing. One holds that women are trying to prove their equality with men and seeking to elevate women's place in Palestinian society. Evidence shows that even as their participation reaches the level of suicide bombing, however, the women win social praise but no structural changes in Palestinian society for the betterment of women. Another explanation is the theory of individual redemption, which argues that the Palestinian women who become involved in suicide bombing do so because they are divorced, barren, adulterers or otherwise shamed or undesirable and their patriarchal society offers no alternatives for redeeming themselves. Contrary to this popular Western and Israeli belief, however, most Palestinian female suicide bombers do not fall into any of these categories of disgrace.

I argue that Palestinian society's response to female suicide bombing and the backgrounds of the women show that, in fact, Palestinian women are not driven so much by a desire to advance women's societal gains or individual redemption, but rather by the same nationalist motivations driving Palestinian male suicide bombers fighting against Israeli occupation and Palestinian suffering. I demonstrate the validity of my argument with an original chart in which I pull together both gendered and non-gendered components of the female suicide bombers' back stories. Once charted, the preponderance of possible political and nationalist catalysts is clear. Continuing to use gendered-based theories to explain why Palestinian women become suicide bombers limits our understanding of the phenomenon and crucially hinders our thinking about how to overcome it.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Laurie Zittrain Eisenberg for her countless hours of editing and mentoring. Not only was she able to provide me with valuable feedback regarding my paper, but she also put in a lot of effort to preserve my sanity with kind words of encouragement.

With regard to Arabic sources, I would like to thank Mohammad Aljayyousi for his assistance in helping me translate documents during our coffee shop meetings. I would also like to thank Andrew Marshall for his time and effort in helping me obtain many hard to find documents.

Lastly, this project would not be possible without the support of close family members and friends.

A Note from the Author

This project was partially supported by an Undergraduate Research Award (URA) as well as a Student Undergraduate Research Grant (SURG) from the Undergraduate Research Office at Carnegie Mellon University. This thesis represents the views of the author and not those of Carnegie Mellon University.

The suicide-bombing by Wafa Idris in an Israeli shoe store on January 27, 2002, killing one Israeli teen, created excitement in the media over the perceived new phenomenon of Palestinian female suicide bombers. Palestinian women's political and even violent participation in the national campaign is not, however, new. In fact, Palestinian female suicide bombing falls within the continuum of women's political participation in the Palestinian struggle against Zionism and Israel.

Many scholars have put forth gendered theories to explain the emergence of Palestine female suicide bombing. One holds that women are trying to prove their equality with men and seeking to elevate women's place in Palestinian society in general. Evidence shows that even as their participation reaches the level of suicide bombing, however, the women win social praise but there are no structural changes in Palestinian society for the betterment of women. Another explanation is the theory of individual redemption, which argues that the Palestinian women who become involved in suicide bombing do so because they are divorced, widowed, barren, adulteresses, or otherwise shamed or undesirable and their traditional patriarchal society gives them no alternatives for redeeming themselves. Contrary to this popular Western and Israeli belief, however, most Palestinian female suicide bombers do not fall into any of these categories of disgrace.

I argue that the response by Palestinian society to Palestinian female suicide bombing and the backgrounds of many of the women show that, in fact, Palestinian women are not driven so much by a desire to advance women's societal gains or individual redemption, but rather by the same nationalistic motivations driving Palestinian male suicide bombers fighting against Israeli occupation and the suffering and stagnation of Palestinian society. I demonstrate the validity of my argument with an original chart compiled of both gendered and non-gendered components of the female suicide bombers' personal histories. Once charted, the preponderance of possible political and nationalist catalysts is clear. Continuing to use gendered-based theories to explain why Palestinian women become suicide

bombers limits our understanding of the phenomenon and crucially hinders our thinking about how to overcome it.

Since the end of the 19th century, Arab nationalists and Israeli Zionists have been clashing in a seemingly unending battle for political control of Palestine. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the end of World War I, British troops administered Palestine with the goal of achieving peaceful cohabitation of Palestinian Arabs and Jews alike. But Arab nationalists actively rebelled against British and Zionist imperialism and occupation. In 1948, the Zionists successfully overcame their opposition with the establishment of the State of Israel, which they successfully defended in the first Arab-Israeli War. Disgruntled Palestinians formed guerilla groups such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to lead an ongoing battle against the Jewish state. In the 1967 war, Israel captured the West Bank and Gaza, which placed more Palestinians under Israeli military occupation. In 1987, increasing frustration with the Israeli occupation and the lack of support from surrounding countries, the Arabs in Gaza rose up in a non-militarized, non-violent civil disobedience movement that called on civilians to resist the occupation by striking, boycotting Israeli products, creating barricades, destroying property, and refusing to pay taxes. This “First Intifada” petered out in 1993 with the negotiation of the Oslo Accords between the PLO and Israel. The “Al-Aqsa Intifada” erupted in 2000 due to the discontent Palestinians felt from the stalled Oslo process and the failed Camp David Summit of July 2000. The second intifada sparked a largely militant movement that brought an influx of Palestinian suicide bombings into Israel proper as well as the emergence of the phenomenon of females detonating the bombs.

After the self-detonation of Palestinian female suicide bomber Wafa Idris killed one Israeli and wounded more than a hundred others on a busy Jaffa road on January 27, 2002, newspapers around the world screamed headlines in praise, condemnation, and/or confusion. The London Arabic-language *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* enthused that “this is the first time a young woman strapped a belt of explosives and bits

of metal around her waist and blew herself up on Jaffa Road in the heart of the occupied city. Thus, she joins the convoys of the martyrs and sets a precedent [for women] to take pride in the history of the Arab and Islamic woman..."¹ 'Adel Hammuda from the Egyptian opposition paper *Saut Al-Umma* commented on the value of Arab women by writing that "The most beautiful and proud picture I saw this week is the picture of the bride of Heaven, Wafa Idris, who turned herself into an explosive device and exploded in Israel. Wafa Idris elevated the value of the Arab woman and, in one moment, and with enviable courage, put an end to the unending debate about equality between men and women."² While Arabic newspapers focused on the inner beauty and gender equality that they perceived Wafa Idris having achieved, Western newspapers presented a clearly different argument. Instead of focusing on "the determination and the resolve of the Palestinian woman to participate as full partners in the national struggle, alongside [their] brothers,"³ Western newspapers wrote about the personal family circumstances they believed brought Wafa Idris to commit a suicide attack. The Israeli newspaper *Kol Hazman* revealed that "her father died when she was eight years old. Her brother served ten years in an Israeli prison, and founded [a branch of] the al-Aqsa Brigades in the al-Amri refugee camp. Her husband divorced her after she had a miscarriage in the seventh month of pregnancy, and two months ago, she refused to remarry. Is it possible that Wafa Idris, a paramedic in the Red Crescent, committed suicide this week on Jaffa Street mostly because her life was so miserable?"⁴ On January 31, 2002, the *New York Times* echoed the question of whether or not Wafa Idris was motivated to commit her act due to her "b[ir]th in a refugee camp, condition[ing] to militancy by the first Palestinian uprising against Israel,

¹ Inquiry and Analysis Series – No. 85. "Wafa Idris: The celebration of the First Female Palestinian Suicide Bomber – Part III." *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, February 14, 2002.

http://www.mefacts.com/cached.asp?x_id=11709 (accessed March 19, 2012).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Avi Issacharoff. "The Palestinian and Israeli Media on Female Suicide Terrorists," in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, ed. Yoram Schweitzer (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2006), 44.

divorce...by a husband disappointed over their failure to have children, [and the] enrage[ment she felt] as she picked up and patched the Palestinian wounded of the current conflict.”⁵

What all of these articles share regardless of location, language, political orientation, and whether or not they chose to praise, condemn, or feel sorry for Wafa, is the reoccurring notion that Wafa Idris’ self-detonation “was virtually unheard of for a woman.”⁶ Scholars know, however, that womens’ active participation in the Palestinian national struggle for liberation dates back to the establishment of the British Mandate for Palestine in the wake of the First World War.

In the early twentieth century, Palestinians were largely rural peasants or urban elites. The history of the two groups and how they merged is complex. Class and geographical divisions between them played a formidable role in the establishment of Palestinian women’s political participation. Palestinian peasant women enjoyed a less rigid social structure, which allowed for greater militant activism than their urban elite counterparts. Often, it was peasants who first experienced the Zionist influx when the newcomers settled on their land. Pastoral women who chose to be politically active were more physically involved in resistance as “a response to the fact that it was their communities that were coming under [first] physical attack.”⁷ Palestinian women [were among the first who acted against an early Zionist agricultural settlement near Afula in 1884 and were key actors resisting British and Zionist occupation. These agrarian women resorted to violence in order to defend their villages, defying British searches, raids, and arrests as well as smuggling and concealing weapons. Although their numbers were few, some of these women joined the revolt in a military capacity alongside men. In 1935, Sheikh Ezzedin al-Qassam called for an armed movement composed of a wide spectrum of Palestinian citizens from villages and cities to join together in an armed struggle. This was an open

⁵ James Bennet, “Arab Woman’s Path to Unlikely ‘Martyrdom’,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2002.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its “New” Women: The Palestinian Women’s Movement, 1920-1948* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 125.

invitation to rural Palestinian women to participate in structured military work. One of the first women combatants was Fatmeh Khalil Ghazal, killed in action on June 23, 1936 at the battle of Wadi Azzoun near Lydda.⁸

The structure of early Arab society required elite urban Palestinian women to follow a political path that differed from that of their rural counterparts. Palestinian urban society limited women's mobility, frowning upon meetings arranged outside the home. Nevertheless, elite women in towns and cities felt so strongly about the national struggle that they contributed by forming charitable organizations, holding demonstrations, petitioning and striking, and collecting funds for the revolt. In 1921, a group of educated, upper class, and urban women (most of whom were connected through marriage or familial ties to male notables already actively involved in politics) founded the Palestine Women's Union, the first official women's organization that let elite women participate in the early resistance against British rule and continuing Zionist expansion.

In 1929 the Palestine Women's Union merged with lesser known groups of other elite women passionate about the Palestinian struggle to form the Arab Women's Association [AWA] (later known as the Arab Women's Union), the first women's congress to formally organize women's political and charitable activities throughout Palestine. The association quickly became involved in nationalist activities by focusing on the political and social repercussions of events such as the Wailing Wall riots of 1929. Throughout the early 1930s, the AWA signed petitions of protest over the impending execution of three Arab men sentenced to death for their roles in the riot, distributed aid and bought land for the families of those executed, and called on women to strike on the anniversary of the executions--not even relinquishing their request after the male-led national movement had abandoned this plan. In 1931, a massive demonstration in Nablus featured women marching in the back with the young men

⁸Leila Jammal, *Contributions by Palestinian Women to the National Struggle for Liberation* (Washington, DC: Middle East Public Relations, 1985), 18.

and boys as they recited nationalist chants and poetry. This scene of women being surrounded by boy scouts or in the rear of demonstrations accompanied by younger men was not uncommon. Often it was a strategic marching tactic used to protect women from the possible violence that could occur during the march. When the British police attempted to separate the men from the women in the Nablus demonstration, a large riot broke out, resulting in fifteen injuries. Ellen Fleischmann records that “one of the women, according to a Zionist intelligence report, killed a policeman,” thus setting an important tone “for future militancy among...women.”⁹

Despite their active involvement in gathering aid, striking, and demonstrating, men generally kept women out of existing political organizations and parties due to the fact that social mixing between the sexes was unacceptable in Palestinian society.¹⁰ While it did occur in some instances, it was also generally uncommon for women to become militantly involved in the struggle. However, after the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948 and the resultant expulsion of Palestinians from twenty cities and four hundred villages, Palestinian women began to join alongside men in secret political parties.¹¹ In the early stages of their involvement, women’s participation within these parties did not go beyond secretarial duties and the recruitment of more female members. Membership was highly unstable and subject to a women’s social circumstance, with mainly educated urban elites or relatives of male members allowed to participate. Yet the very fact that women were permitted a minor role within the political realm set the stage for upcoming women’s political activism as the Palestinian struggle progressed.

As an alternative to individual involvement in secret political activities, women were also pushed by society toward joining the resistance by becoming members of charitable organizations. The founding

⁹ Fleischmann, *The Nation and its “New” Women*, 121.

¹⁰ Islah Abdul Jawwad. “The Evolution of The Political Role of the Palestinian Women's Movement in the Uprising,” in *The Palestinians: New Directions*, ed. Michael Hudson (Washington D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies Georgetown University, 1990), 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

of the PLO in 1964 and its subdivision The General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) in 1965 ushered in a new era of women's charitable organizations. The GUPW "was created as a mass organization to participate in liberating the homeland...by giving services to women"¹² and thus providing women with a way "to mobilize the efforts of Palestinian women and to organize a progressive political women's organization within the framework of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in order to represent Palestinian women everywhere and to defend women's material and moral interests, as well as to improve their social, cultural, vocational and living standards in general, and above all to achieve equality in all areas of social and economic life."¹³ As a charitable organization, the GUPW organized literacy, sewing, first aid and nursing courses, and founded orphanages, hospitals, and schools.¹⁴ Their activities in relation to the Palestinian struggle concentrated on writing to the media, striking, demonstrating, and delivering letters of complaint to foreign consulates.¹⁵ Having a direct connection to the umbrella organization of the PLO, women joined the ranks of the resistance fighters (the fedayeen) in large numbers, receiving military training both in Gaza and the West Bank and in refugee camps in other Middle Eastern countries.

This military training became useful after 1967 when the Israeli defeat of the Arab armies and subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip created 300,000 new refugees and furthered the social, political, and economic repression of Palestinians.¹⁶ The PLO encouraged Palestinian females to join the ranks of men, reflected in slogans such as "women will only be liberated by the liberation of

¹²Islah Jad. "From Salons to Popular Committees," in *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads*, ed. Jamal Nassar and Roger Heacock (New York: Prager Publishers, 1990), 128.

¹³Simona Sharoni, *Gender and the Israeli Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1995), 70.

¹⁴Gluck S. Berger, "Palestinian Women: Gender Politics and Nationalism," *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 24, no. 3 (1995): 6.

¹⁵Jawwad, "The Political Role of the Palestinian Women's Movement," 66.

¹⁶Sharoni, *Gender and the Israeli Palestinian Conflict*, 63.

society” and “men and women--side by side in the battle.”¹⁷ Fatmeh Barnawi was the first militant women of the PLO arrested by Israeli forces on November 23, 1967 for placing a bomb at the Zion Cinema in Jerusalem.¹⁸ At the time of her arrest, only ten females had been arrested and a number fined. By 1968, however, a surge of women’s participation in the resistance brought the number of female prisoners in Israeli jails to one hundred. These women were mostly accused of establishing contact with the fedayeen, concealing and smuggling weapons, and/or enrolling in illegal militant and political organizations.¹⁹ Perhaps the most famous Palestinian women political actor at this time was Leila Khaled, a Palestinian refugee whose family relocated to Lebanon during the 1948 Palestinian exodus from Israel [See appendix A]. Khaled was a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine when she acted as part of a team that hijacked two airplanes carrying Israeli passengers, first in 1969 and then again in 1970, when she was arrested and briefly jailed in England.²⁰ In April 1978, Dala al-Mudhrabi became a Palestinian national icon when she led a unit of twenty-two young men to hijack a civilian bus in Israel on a mission to free Palestinian political prisoners held in Israeli jails [see appendix B]. This operation, known by Israelis as the Coastal Road massacre, with 38 Israeli civilian deaths, was largely regarded by Palestinians as heroic, where Dala al-Mudhrabi and her unit are perceived to have “fought courageously...until finally they were blown up by Israeli soldiers and military units.”²¹

As Dala al-Mudhrabi was organizing her brigade, four women’s committees, each aligned with a different political organization, appeared between the late 1970s and early 1980s. These organizations were led by “women with political affiliations who were armed with their experience inside Israeli

¹⁷Jad, “From Salons to Popular Committees,” 129.

¹⁸Jammal, *Contributions by Palestinian Women*, 56.

¹⁹Jad, “From Salons to Popular Committees,” 129.

²⁰Jammal, *Contributions by Palestinian Women*, 55.

²¹*Ibid.*, 57.

prisons and inside political parties.”²² Their primary purpose was to recruit women “to [their] particular [political] trend within the nationalist movement”.²³ These women held an underlying motive to transform women’s social status. Items on the agendas of these organizations explicitly called for the “emancipati[on] of Palestinian women” and demanded equality with men in the form of equal pay for equal work as well as other social protections for working women.²⁴ However, these organizations focused on the main purpose of the Palestinian national agenda; issues concerning gender were occasionally raised but rarely acted upon.

These four organizations primarily represented women’s political participation when, in December 1987, the first Palestinian Intifada erupted. Increasing frustration with the Israeli occupation and the lack of support from surrounding countries led the Arabs in Gaza to rise up in a non-militarized, non-violent civil disobedience movement that called on civilians to resist the occupation by striking, boycotting Israeli products, creating barricades, destroying property, and refusing to pay taxes. Palestinian women were highly active in this mobilization. During the first three months of the uprising, women “took to the streets to join numerous demonstrations and marches organized by the women’s committees.”²⁵ Women of all ages and social classes actively participated by throwing stones, building roadblocks, raising Palestinian flags, and preventing arrests by Israeli soldiers, sometimes to the point of extreme violence.²⁶ A correspondent for the Israeli daily *Yediot Ahronot* newspaper warned Israeli soldiers that “If you are patrolling in the Old City [of Jerusalem] or in the neighborhood at the borderline, be careful of Arab women, who have lately proved as dangerous as men.”²⁷

²²Jawwad, “The Political Role of the Palestinian Women’s Movement,” 66-67.

²³Berger, “Palestinian Women,” 6.

²⁴Jad, “From Salons to Popular Committees,” 132.

²⁵Sharoni, *Gender and the Israeli Palestinian Conflict*, 70.

²⁶Jad, “From Salons to Popular Committees,” 133.

²⁷ Nadhal Al-Hindi, *Spotlight on the Struggle of Palestinian Women* (in Arabic) (Amman: Al-Karmel Publishing House, 1995), 133.

These women's violent rebellion against Israeli forces is vital in the discussion of women in the first intifada. In her book, *Spotlight on the Struggle of Palestinian Women*, Nadhal Al-Hindi describes women as leaders, or those "who confront and attack occupation forces by a variety of actions ranging from throwing rocks to Molotov bombs in addition to leading demonstrations and protests."²⁸ Fighting and scuffling with soldiers was a daily occurrence for women, as was participation in military factions of political organizations. Abeer Al-Wahidi was one woman who was active during this time. Abeer's childhood was full of images of Israeli soldiers abusing her family. In an interview with Al-Hindi, Abeer remembers how her father was arrested and taken away from their home when she was only six years old. This incident filled her with hatred towards the Israeli occupation. Apart from this, she was used to seeing Israeli troops on Ramallah's streets causing civil unrest by chasing children, roughing up Palestinian civilians, and breaking into houses. In 1987, Abeer entered Bir Zeit University and immediately joined Fatah's youth movement on campus. When the first Intifada broke out, she participated in demonstrations and protests. In 1990, she joined Fatah's military wing in Ramallah. Abeer led several operations against the Ofra settlement, which resulted in the death of one settler. She also participated in other attacks on Israeli civilian and military cars.²⁹

It was this popular mobilization during the first year and a half of the intifada that transformed the boundaries of Palestinian women's social status. Roles and responsibilities of activism that were normally reserved for men could be now fully assumed by women.³⁰ Arguably, women were seen just as equally important as men, where before they were given minor roles that led to little social change.

One young woman described this social change as perplexing, stating that

Before the intifada, no girl was allowed to walk in the streets alone. She had to be either with her father, or her brother...[After the intifada began she came] back to home maybe after 10

²⁸ Ibid., 131.

²⁹ Ibid., 138-139.

³⁰ Fadawa Al-Labadi, "Palestinian Women's Emancipation and the Uprising for Independence," *Resources for Feminist Research* 30, no. 3-4 (2004): 122.

p.m....If [Palestinian society] allow[ed women] to do something, it's suddenly not just allowed, [but viewed as normal].³¹

This newly perceived normality is continuously echoed through much literature published in 1987 and shortly thereafter. A prevailing belief that circulated among Palestinian women was that

Women who engaged in the range of intifada activities felt that they had a stake in a future Palestinian state and assumed their roles would continue. The younger ones saw themselves, or at least members of their generation, as active participants in a future government, even as members of parliament. The slightly older cohort who were already married and had children, on the other hand, envisioned a state that would provide services to lighten their load....³²

What enabled these women at the time of the first intifada to step out of their traditional roles-- regardless of their social status, age, and location and take to the streets in mass political demonstrations and protest? While women were political actors before the beginning of the first intifada, never before had Palestinian society seen such a diverse influx of new members. First, it should be emphasized that nationalism itself allowed women to transcend Palestinian patriarchal boundaries. As evidenced by then historical participation since the early 1900s, Palestinian women transitioned into the public sphere by their alignment with the national movement. The massive scale of the first intifada allowed women to leave their homes by being "direct and active...[and] march[ing] side by side with their fathers, husbands, and sons, in every aspect of the struggle."³³ Rita Giacaman describes this phenomenon of transcending social roles by stating

In such an atmosphere of national strife and revolutionary potential, the calls of the leadership were for all sectors of society to join in the struggle for liberation, and women notwithstanding. These circumstances obliterated divisions (whether class or gender ones) normally found in society, although perhaps temporarily, and allowed previously docile and inactive sectors of society, especially women, to locate for themselves useful participatory roles in the uprising that are sanctioned by the political leadership and therefore accepted by their communities.³⁴

³¹Berger, "Palestinian Women," 8.

³²Ibid., 9.

³³ Rita Giacaman, "Palestinian Women in the Uprising: From Followers to Leaders," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2, no. 1 (1989): 142.

³⁴Ibid., 143.

This idea of nationalism that lets Palestinian women step out of their patriarchal boundaries is frequently referred to as the concept of *'al-ard qabl al-'ard* or "land before honor." Honor and shame are dominant idioms governing the behavior and gender roles of Palestinian men and women.³⁵ Historically, women have been confined to their homes, unable to work or participate in any way outside of their traditional patriarchal societal roles. The strong emphasis on gender regulations allowed Palestinian men to act as protectors of Palestinian women. Due to their perceived "weak, less intelligent, [and] emotional" nature, women lacked freedom to take care of themselves.³⁶ The emergence of the Israeli state changed this concept of protection and regulation. Due to the increased dislocation and jailing of male family members and a continuous change society's structure, Palestinian women were forced to find employment outside of the home and to participate directly in public life through protests, demonstrations, and ways that they would otherwise not be able to if it had not been for rebellion against the Israeli state.³⁷

Palestinian women could also formally transcend their social roles at the beginning of the first intifada due to their active involvement in women's committees. Although these committees mainly focused on teaching and rendering services to Palestinians that can be perceived as an extension "of traditional gender roles", they nonetheless provided a direct way for female involvement in the Palestinian national struggle. With a link to these women's committees, Palestinian women were allowed to participate in "visiting families and attending funerals of martyrs, sheltering *shabab* [young men], treating the wounded, providing alternative education when schools were closed, establishing kindergartens, planting victory gardens, knitting sweaters for prisoners, demonstrating for prisoners'

³⁵ Julie Peteet, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 186.

³⁶ Kitty Warnock, *Land Before Honor* (London: MacMillan Education LTD, 1990), 23.

³⁷ Peteet, *Gender in Crisis*, 187.

releases, and standing up to soldiers in the streets...”³⁸ The phenomenon of women aligning with women’s committees has been a common form of activism in the Palestinian national struggle since the early 1900s. It would appear that these alignments allowed women to independently join in the Palestinian national struggle through female-oriented mass based organizations. However, it was only through women’s committees’ direct political affiliation with organizations such as the PLO and other political factions that allowed women to be active outside of their homes. As evidenced in the early 1900s, when women’s committees were first being formed in Palestine, all of these committees were sub-factions of male based political organizations. Women who were members of these women’s committees were directly related as wives, sisters, and daughters of males who were members of the larger political organization. This meant that in order for a woman to be “involved with a particular faction, [she] had to be affiliated with the same faction through its women’s committee. It never happened that a woman joined a faction that was different from that of the males in her family.”³⁹

The long history of Palestinian women’s political participation since the emergence of the nationalist movement in Palestine, their contributions to the first intifada, and the alignment of their organizations with the nationalist cause, led naturally to the emergence of Palestinian female suicide bombing in the second intifada. Palestinian women have always participated in the Palestinian national struggle since “it was inevitable for the Palestinian woman, comprising half of the population, to be influenced by such conditions.”⁴⁰ They served in roles as demonstrators, paramedics, militant fighters, and supporters “for the sake of self-defense, [their] homeland, and the national cause.”⁴¹ Thus, the fact that Palestinian women become suicide bombers is a logical extension of the historical continuum of

³⁸ Cheryl Rubenberg, *Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 218.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴⁰ Ibhais, Hassan, Sami El Salahat, Mohsen Saleh, and Miariam A. Itani, eds. *The Suffering of the Palestinian Women under the Israeli Occupation* (in Arabic) (Beirut: Al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations, 2008) 89.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

women's activism in the resistance. Palestinian female suicide bombing, then, is not an entirely new phenomenon.

In the first Intifada, women saw their active involvement as a way to "gain their liberation" from traditional Palestinian societal roles.⁴² However, stepping out of historical gender restrictions to participate in the first Intifada did not, in fact, significantly alter their status as females. While some positive changes occurred, such as female mobilization in large numbers, these apparent transformations were often fleeting and highly susceptible to evolving trends in the political situation. An example of this was the push by religious male Palestinians for women to return to traditional gender roles. The Palestinian women's call for more social liberation was no match for the demands by organizations, such as the Islamic Resistance Movement, that women return to traditionalism. This was evident in the "vicious campaign" in Gaza led by a subgroup of the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, to impose the *hijab* (headscarf) on "all [Palestinian] women," regardless of religion or place of residence.⁴³ Wearing the hijab became aligned with the nationalist movement, where it was understood to be "a sign of women's political commitment, as women, to the intifada."⁴⁴ In contrast to this, "bare-headed" women were considered "vain and frivolous, or, at worst, anti-nationalist."⁴⁵ This backlash also forced women to retreat to their homes by trying to eliminate their presence in the public sphere. It urged them to return to roles such as teaching or homemaking that were "more in line with prevailing notions of womanhood and gender relations."⁴⁶

The apparent imminence of Palestinian statehood and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority [PA] following the Oslo Accords in 1993 drastically transformed Palestinian females' political

⁴² Frances Hasso, "The Women's Front: Nationalism, Feminism, and Modernity in Palestine," *Gender and Society* 12, no. 4 (1998): 449.

⁴³ Rema Hammami, "Women, the Hijab, and the Intifada," *Middle East Report*, no. 164/165 (1990): 24.

⁴⁴ Hammami, "Women, the Hijab, and the Intifada," 26.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Sharoni, *Gender and the Israeli Palestinian Conflict*, 73.

involvement in a negative way. Their political participation was no longer officially welcomed in the public sphere. As Palestinian men overtook the governance of the Palestinian territory, “they encouraged the marginalization of Palestinian women and promoted the ‘defeminization’ of Palestinian political activity.”⁴⁷ A few years prior, these same women were able to march side by side with men they perceived as their equals, optimistically preparing themselves for positions in leadership and decision-making roles in the building of a state infrastructure for Palestine. Yet contrary to the expectations of many female activists in the women’s committees, women’s participation in the popular committees did not result in a dramatic change in their social status or in a move toward gender equality in Palestinian society after the establishment of the PA.⁴⁸ In the first administration of the PA, there was only one woman minister and one under-secretary, followed by a few other female appointments.⁴⁹ This was a tragic let-down to women who believed that their fight for the nationalist cause was also a fight for Palestinian societal changes as well.

Another radical change happening at this time in Palestinian politics was the erosion of mass-based organizations with ties to grass roots activism, such as the former women’s committees, into a few solid international donor supported Palestinian institutional forums and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).⁵⁰ Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttab describe this transition as a product of the “embryonic state”, where the proto-state

has thus transformed the terrain of politics and resistance, diminishing the avenues of participation for people in general and women in particular, as formal politics largely replaced informal forms of mobilization, and the ‘outside’ leadership took power from the ‘inside’ leaders in the West Bank of Gaza. The resulting duality between strong formal political activity versus weak informal activity was the first step in marginalizing the civil society and limiting the participation of women.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Al-Labadi, “Palestinian Women’s Emancipation,” 123.

⁴⁸ Sharoni, *Gender and the Israeli Palestinian Conflict*, 75.

⁴⁹ Al-Labadi, “Palestinian Women’s Emancipation,” 124.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵¹ P. Johnson and E. Kuttab, “Where Have All the Women (and Men) Gone? Reflections on Gender and the Second Palestinian Intifada,” *Feminist Review* no. 69 (2001): 27.

As a result of this, women's political participation and their interest in being active participants in the political arena declined. The number of women mobilized in political parties dropped and many women also abandoned their activities in grass-roots organizations such as the various women's committees.⁵² A "once vibrant movement that included women from cities, towns, villages, and refugee camps" was now "reduced to a few internationally funded, city-based, well-furnished, and well equipped offices...[that] employed a limited number of urban educated women...[who were] often headed by the leadership of the [Palestinian] movement."⁵³

In July 2000 United States President Bill Clinton hosted Palestinian President Yasar Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Camp David for a round of make-or-break peace talks. The failure of those talks plunged Palestinians hoping for a diplomatic solution into despair. The straw that broke the camel's back was a September 28, 2000 visit by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the mutually Muslim and Jewish sacred area, the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which Palestinians saw as a provocation and a sign of Israel's determination to maintain control of the holy Muslim site that housed the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosques. Now, a new Palestinian generation was ready to act. These young figures were the direct descendants who had watched their mothers and fathers hurl rocks at Israeli soldiers during the first Palestinian uprising. Now, it was their turn to participate.

On September 28, 2000, Palestinian rioting erupted following Sharon's visit to the Haram. Ziv Hellman described the differences between the two intifadas whereas "the first Intifada was characterized most memorably by Palestinian youths throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, the second Intifada was far bloodier, taking on the aspects of armed conflict, guerilla warfare, and terrorist attacks."

⁵² Al-Labadi, "Palestinian Women's Emancipation," 125.

⁵³ Anan Ameri, "Challenges Confronting the Palestinian Women's Movement." in *Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiating Female 'Public' Space in Islamic/ate Societies*, ed. Asma Afsaruddin (Cambridge: Harvard College, 1999), 45-46.

The image of the stone-armed Palestinian child of 1990 was replaced by the armed adult fighter of 2000.⁵⁴ The most defining figure of all was the suicide bomber, which could be a man or a woman.

In the second “Al-Aqsa” intifada, women’s roles were shaped in a way that drastically differed from those in the first intifada just ten years prior. Johnson and Kuttub argue that “the extension of women’s roles in the first intifada was possible because the division between combatants and non-combatants was very fluid. In the second intifada... ‘combatants’ [were] highly defined by gender and age.”⁵⁵ Palestinian women’s depoliticization and decreased participation in politics between the first and second intifadas was in many ways a response to the pattern of “gendered nationalism and...the re-inscription of patriarchal patterns of power.”⁵⁶ When Wafa Idris detonated her bomb outside of that busy Israeli shop store in 2002, she may have signaled the intensification of participation by Palestinian women in the national struggle, but she did not contribute in any meaningful way to the improvement of women’s social status in Palestine.

Suicide bombing against Israelis did not begin with the advent of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. On April 16, 1993, Tamam Nabulsi, a member of the Islamic Resistance Movement, blew himself up in his car beside an Israeli bus parked near the West Bank settlement of Mechola, causing two Israeli deaths and wounding five others. This was the first successful suicide attack perpetrated by a Palestinian organization, although the phenomenon remained infrequent.⁵⁷ Suicide bombing or “the smart bomb of the poor” surged during the first stage of the Al-Aqsa intifada. Since the second intifada, unlike the first, embraced the force of arms, suicide bombing seemed like a successful strategic threat to Israel because it was able to “threat[en] Israel’s ability to maintain the routine of daily life, and to implement its social

⁵⁴ “The Second Intifada Begins.” *My Jewish Learning*, 2003.

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/israel/Contemporary_Life/Israeli-Palestinian_Relations/Second_Intifada.shtml (accessed March 15, 2012).

⁵⁵ Johnson and Kuttub, “Where Have All the Women Gone?,” 37.

⁵⁶ Al-Labadi, “Palestinian Women’s Emancipation,” 123.

⁵⁷ Shaul Kimhi, “Who are the Palestinian Suicide Bombers?” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 4 (2004): 817.

and economic goals.”⁵⁸ Since the Al-Aqsa intifada was heavily militarized, the Palestinian authority believed that this would put a greater pressure on Israel to change the conditions of the negotiations and achieve a final status agreement as rapidly as possible.⁵⁹

Female suicide bombing in Palestine emerged as an important component of this strategic threat. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, observed on January 14, 2004, that women suicide bombers were used in the al-Aqsa Intifada “like the reserve army—when there [was] a necessity, we use[d] them.”⁶⁰ As the Intifada continued, women became “a significant evolution in [the Palestinian national struggle]. The male fighters face[d] many obstacles...[leaving] women...[to] more easily reach the [Israeli civilian]targets.”⁶¹ Wafa Idris and the Palestinian female suicide bombers who followed a few months later provided a tactical advantage to the Palestinian national struggle. In this, they augmented the number of combatants willing to participate as well as increased world-wide publicity documenting this perceived new phenomenon. More importantly, female suicide bombers provided an element of surprise and an easier way to pass through Israeli checkpoints. Women were able to fake pregnancy and hide explosives, guns, and other items needed to execute terrorist attacks. They also aroused less suspicion than men because security forces traditionally viewed them as less threatening.⁶² What also enabled them to enter Israeli proper undetected is Israeli soldier’s hesitancy to search women due to strict honor regulations in Palestinian society and the scandal body searches could provoke.

While Palestinian female suicide bombers were seen as potential “advantage[s]” by extremist groups and “[as] more effective [suicide bombers] with their increased accessibility and media shock

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Johnson and Kuttub, “Where Have All the Women Gone?,” 30.

⁶⁰ Debra Zedalis, *Female Suicide Bombers* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004), 7.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Paige Whaley-Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorism* (London: Ashgate, 2008), 194.

value”, they were also viewed in a context that some scholars argue was equal to men.⁶³ Dorit Naaman believes that

When women opt to fight alongside men, they challenge the dichotomy of woman as victim/man as defender. Women fighters are physically strong, are active (therefore agents), and, most important, are willing to kill (hence, they are violent). They challenge not only the images of women as victims of war but also the traditional patriarchal binary opposition that postulates women as physically and emotionally weak and incapable of determining and defending the course of their own lives.⁶⁴

This vision of women as active fighters and participants in the second intifada is a reiteration of their praise in the first stage of the first intifada, when female participants hurled rocks at Israeli soldiers, hid weapons, and served on charitable women’s organizations. Yet in the second intifada, as “female suicide bombers use their bodies as weapons, thus circumventing the patriarchal system...[they are able to] enter... the symbolic order as (dead) symbols or as myths.”⁶⁵ The emergence of the culture of martyrdom and how Palestinians celebrate these *shahidat*, or successful female suicide bombers, is one example of how even as they are praised, they are still perceived in traditionally female terms and therefore have not accomplished anything in terms of advancing women’s position in Palestinian society.

As recruitment and idolization soared, female suicide bombers were elevated to celebrity status. Social support was shown in public assemblies, public funerals, posters of *shahidat*, joyful parades, monuments named after suicide bombers, and otherwise general praise and ululations.⁶⁶ The day after Wafa Idris’s attack, the Arab media glorified her as “a Mona Lisa, only more beautiful than the original.”⁶⁷ Saddam Hussein, then president of Iraq, hastened to erect a monument in Baghdad in her

⁶³ Zedalis, *Female Suicide Bombers*, 8.

⁶⁴ Dorit Naaman, “Brides of Palestine/Angels of Death: Media, Gender, and Performance in the Case of the Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers,” *Signs* 32 (2007), 935.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 950.

⁶⁶ Zedalis, *Female Suicide Bombers*, 29.

⁶⁷ Raphael Israeli, “Palestinian Women’s Question for a Voice in the Public Square through Islamikaze Martyrdom,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 1 (2004), 87.

honor. Wafa Idris and her actions held an ongoing idolization, where she continues to be elevated to celebrity status even ten years after her death. In 2011, the Al-Amari Palestinian youth center announced a football tournament for youth to be held in Wafa Idris' honor. Songs and videos honoring her are regularly broadcast in the years following her attack, acclaiming

My sister Wafa, my sister Wafa
Oh the heartbeat of pride,
Oh blossom who was on earth and is now in Heaven.
Allahu Akhbar!
Oh Palestine of the Arabs,
Allahu Akbar, Oh Wafa!
But you chose Shahada
In death you have brought life to the aspiration
But you chose Shahada
In death you have brought life to the aspiration.⁶⁸

Wafa Idris, the “blossom,” an obviously feminine reference, is not the only Palestinian female suicide bomber to be glorified and admired. Every successful female suicide bomber has been honored with some form of social support, similar to every male who has successfully committed an act of suicide bombing. They are highly regarded because these deceased men and women are equally seen as “sacrifice[ing] [their] life for the land.”⁶⁹

The reaction and statements regarding female suicide bombers in Palestine by Sheikh Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, reveal the rapidly evolving sentiment in favor of female suicide bombers within Palestinian society. Initially opposed to women's suicide bombing, Yassin stated at the start of the second intifada in 2000 that women were not needed for martyrdom operations because “a woman martyr is problematic for Muslim society.”⁷⁰ Later he changed his reasoning to say that since Hamas was unable “absorb the growing number of applications from *shabab* [male youths] who wanted to

⁶⁸ Palestinian Media Watch. “Palestinian TV Broadcasts Song Praising Wafa Idris.” May 1, 2002. http://www.palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=111&fld_id=111&doc_id=4685 (accessed March 13, 2012).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ O'Rourke, Lindsey. “Behind the Woman Behind the Bomb.” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/02/opinion/02orourke.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed March 15, 2012).

undertake them,” asserting that “the woman is the second defense line in the resistance to the occupation. She shelters the fugitive, loses the son, husband, and brother, bears the consequence of this, and faces starvation and blockade.”⁷¹ Two weeks after Wafa Idris’ detonation, he issued a statement that women were only allowed to act in such a mission if chaperoned by a man. Just twenty-four hours later, he revised his statement to say that women were allowed to proceed alone if not unaccompanied for more than twenty hours.⁷² This rapid change in a highly regarded traditional cleric’s remarks reveals his trying to keep up with the Palestinian societal push toward the acceptance of female participation in suicide bombing.

But praise did not translate into a more egalitarian Palestinian perception of women. When female suicide bombers are praised, they are often noted for their feminine mystique and their ability to put “land before honor”. The framing of female suicide missions as a form of sacrifice is a “successful rhetorical strategy” that “define[s] the act in terms consonant with accepted gender expectations, and, as such, to make the act more palatable to society.” Thus, Cindy Ness notes, “rather than being perceived as a display of female inhumanity, which Palestinian society would be hard pressed to accept, a female who offers her life [in the context of suicide bombing] is seen as engaging in the most profound form of selflessness” where “giving life to a Palestinian state is privileged even over motherhood.”⁷³ Egypt’s newspaper *Al-Sha’b* glorified female suicide bombers as women who could teach all Arab people a lesson regarding the heroic defense of Palestine with their “meager, thin, and weak bod[ies]” thus playing on the notion that women could be heroic yet still retain traditional feminine stereotypes.⁷⁴ ‘Abd al-Halim Qandil compared Wafa Idris to Joan of Arc, asserting that “a nation who has in it Wafa

⁷¹ Frances Hasso, “Discourse and Political Deployment by/of the 2002 Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers/Martyrs,” *Feminist Review* 81 (2005), 31.

⁷² Cindy Ness, “In the Name of the Cause: Women’s Work in Secular and Religious,” in *Female, Terror, and Militancy*, ed. Cindy Ness (New York: Routledge, 2008), 28.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁷⁴ Israeli, “Palestinian Women’s Question,” 86.

Idris can never be defeated....[for she becomes] the most beautiful of women in the world, and in the world to come, once she rose to Heaven.” He continued to express her martyrdom in traditional female terms as “a death which instilled life” and “a chunk of flesh and blood transformed into illuminating spirit and purity for the generations to come” by praising her beauty and purity.⁷⁵

Even though the previous statements and perceived notions of women obtaining equal status with men were reiterated throughout the media and by other Palestinian women, female roles in suicide bombing were not equal to those of men. Female columnist Dr. Samia Sa’d a-Din proclaimed that women were now able to take a more direct approach to the Palestinian national struggle since they had “torn the gender classification out of their birth certificates, declaring that sacrifice for the Palestinian homeland would not be for men alone” She remarked that “all Palestinian women [would be able to] write the history of the liberation with their blood, [by] becom[ing] time bombs in the face of the Israeli enemy.”⁷⁶ Female film director Dr. Armira Abu-Fattuh wrote under the headline “An Oscar-winning film”

This is not a movie like all other movies. The heroine is the beautiful, pure Palestinian woman, Wafaldris, full of faith and willpower. I could find no one better than she, and I could find no film more wonderful than this, that shocked Israel’s heart... From Paradise where she is now, she shouts with all her strength: “Enough glorification of the dead! Enough glorification of the victories of your forefathers!!!” They have played their part, and now it is [a woman’s] turn...⁷⁷

The belief that a Palestinian female suicide bomber’s death “proves that all sectors of [Palestinian] people, men and women, each at the other’s side, are unified in the struggle for freedom, and in the confrontation with aggression” raises the argument of “dying for equality,” in which female suicide bombers are supposedly raised to the same social status as men in their roles of death.⁷⁸ In fact,

⁷⁵ Ibid., 86-87.

⁷⁶ Issacharoff, “The Palestinian and Israeli Media on Female Suicide Terrorists,” 48.

⁷⁷ Amira Abu-Fattuh, “An Oscar-winning Film,” Al-Wafd (in Arabic), February 7, 2002.

⁷⁸ Issacharoff, “The Palestinian and Israeli Media on Female Suicide Terrorists,” 47.

this is not the case at all. Female roles within suicide bombing are quite limited. Yoram Schweitzer writes that based on his interviews with failed Palestinian female suicide bombers, they

definitely [do not act as] leaders in their organizations, but rather serve as pawns and sacrificial lambs. They are not responsible for the planning of the operations and are actually dispatched to the missions with barely a say as to their targets, the timing of the bombing, and the way the operation should be conducted. For the most part they have not otherwise been trained as fighters, and a suicide mission in itself requires little investment in job training, in terms of either time or money. Indeed for many of the women, the contribution of a suicide mission to their national or religious struggle is precisely that: a form of employment in the male-dominated domain of suicide bombing.⁷⁹

The extremist groups which “train” Palestinian females do little more than introduce them to handling the explosives they will be using on their bodies. A reporter interviewing a commander training future Palestinian female suicide bombers noted that “the women spend as much as 6 hours a day familiarizing themselves with explosives. They are introduced to the bomb belts that will rip their flesh, while killing and maiming those around them. Finally, the girls have to practice moving around with the weight of the explosive belts strapped to their bodies.”⁸⁰ This training then, does not provide Palestinian females with any knowledge other than how to die while killing as many Israeli civilians as possible.

Occasionally women, especially older ones, do assist in the recruitment process of potential female suicide bombers. They provide emotional support, sustenance while travelling, and overnight accommodations for female recruits. In a culture that follows strict societal norms, female recruiters and operators then are necessary as a cover in operations to avoid suspicions of immoral behavior (such as women being alone with men).⁸¹ Yet this too is overseen by males who are higher in charge in the militant organizations.

⁷⁹ Yoram Schweitzer. “Introduction,” in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, ed. Yoram Schweitzer (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2006), 9.

⁸⁰ Zedalis, *Female Suicide Bombers*, 9.

⁸¹ Anat Berko and Edna Erez, “Gender, Palestinian Women, and Terrorism: Women's Liberation or Oppression?” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30 (2007), 505.

So as not to appear to be overturning normative values, Palestinian female suicide bombers' actions can then be justified in three specific ways. First, their participation is regarded as unnecessary and then predicated on certain socially conservative stipulations, as evidenced by Sheikh Yassin's differing statements first disregarding the use of female suicide bombers and then accepting them as Palestinian martyrs. While female suicide bombing may be seen as a deviation from traditional Palestinian gender norms, leaders such as Sheikh Yassin struggled to accommodate public opinion supportive of women's suicide bombing while trying to retain proper gender roles. Secondly, elevating Palestinian female suicide bomber's status through the unique role in the culture of martyrdom is still tied to traditional feminist characteristics. Their roles do not transcend leadership lines or anything other than recruitment and detonation, thus causing some to argue that they are merely acting as "pawns and sacrificial lambs" under men's leadership.⁸² They are praised by the Arab media in a way that celebrates their traditional feminine roles as giving birth and being beautiful and pious. Lastly, female suicide bombing can be seen as a continuation of women's participation in the Palestinian national struggle. Due to the rise in popularity of suicide bombing in the second intifada, it is only a logical extension of historical continuum that women become actors in suicide bombing alongside and under the direction of men. The fact that they are now allowed to be suicide bombers by Palestinian society does not mean, however, that they are equal with men.

Despite women bombers' greater ability to escape detection, their tactical value to the extremist groups, and their celebration in the Arab street and media, their successes do not, however, lead to improved status for women in Palestinian society. Data from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and other Palestinian national surveys suggests that the status of women in the labor force and in the home weakened or remained the same even after the phenomenon of female suicide bombing became established. Although there are nearly two million females in Palestine, only 15.2% of those are

⁸² Schweitzer, "Introduction," 9.

employed.⁸³ This small percentage of women entering the labor force does not mean most women are uneducated. In fact, a greater percentage of Palestinian women enter secondary school and graduate from university than do men.⁸⁴ However, much of Palestinian society still considers it unnatural for Palestinian women to work in the public sphere. When they do work outside the home, their roles are minimal and in traditionally female occupations, such as secretaries, teachers, and nurses.⁸⁵ Despite women's longstanding participation in the national struggle, even to the point of apparently proving their "equality" with men through suicide bombing, women only make up 12.9% of the members in the Palestinian Legislative Council.⁸⁶ They compose of only 10% of judges, 12.8% of doctors, and 16.9% of lawyers as well.⁸⁷ Palestinian women marry at an average age of 19 and generally bear 4 to 5 children in their lifetime, sapping their time and energy from public activity.⁸⁸ Strict societal roles emphasize Palestinian women's place within the home, even to the point of domestic violence, forced suicide, and murder in the name of "honor killings" directed against women whose conduct challenges behavioral norms.⁸⁹ According to the Arab World for Research and Development, 80% of Palestinian respondents polled recognized that women are oppressed to a large extent or some extent in their society.⁹⁰ Together these statistics suggest that political and occupational opportunities for Palestinian women have generally remained the same over the last twenty years since the first intifada.⁹¹ There has been little documented evidence that women's political and militant roles, including the ultimate suicide

⁸³ Palestinian Women's Statistics at a Glance, Palestinian Women's Research and Documentation Center. <http://pwrdc.ps/index.php?page=detail&p=66> (accessed March 21, 2012).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Nahla Abdo. "Women and Poverty in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: A Critical Literary Review," Palestinian Women's Research and Documentation Center, 2007, 32.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ "AWRAD's New Poll Reveals" (Press Release in Arabic). Arab World for Research and Development. February 20, 2008. http://www.awrad.org/pdfs/iri_poll_4_results_arabic_ealestinian_women.doc (accessed March 23, 2012).

⁹¹ Palestinian Women's Statistics at a Glance, Palestinian Women's Research and Documentation Center. <http://pwrdc.ps/index.php?page=detail&p=66> (accessed March 21, 2012).

bombing, has led to an improved regard or status for women in Palestinian society, yet they continue to fight anyways.⁹² There must be another reason, then, as to why they choose to kill by dying.

Some scholars' research has concluded that Palestinian women commit acts of suicide bombing for reasons specific to their gender. Barbara Victor reports in her book *Army of Roses* that through her interviews and travels

I found that there were, in fact, very different motives and rewards for the men who died a martyr's death than for the women. Consequently, it became essential for me to understand the reasoning of the men who provided the moral justification for the seduction and indoctrination that eventually convinces a woman or girl that the most valuable thing she can do with her life is end it; at the same time, I saw it was crucial to understand the social environment that pushes these young women over the edge of personal despair.⁹³

She and other Western and Israeli scholars believe that Palestinian women choose to be suicide bombers for reasons of personal redemption, with romantic or familial complications contributing to their motivations. They argue that even if female suicide bombers' main motive is vengeance, "it is often accompanied by a personal or family problem."⁹⁴ These scholars continuously interpret these problems within the context of gender, wherein "female suicide bombing is considered to be a way to resist patriarchal subservience, erase stains due to violations of sexual behavior, or restore a tarnished family or personal reputation."⁹⁵ The main problem with using gender as an explanatory framework for female suicide bombing is that it sets women's reasoning apart from that of male suicide bombers, therefore undermining or discarding religious or nationalistic reasons for the women's actions. It also dismisses their past political participation in the struggle for Palestinian nationalism and relegates them to a legion of disgraced and marginalized puppets.

⁹² "AWRAD's New Poll Reveals" (Press Release in Arabic). Arab World for Research and Development. February 20, 2008. http://www.awrad.org/pdfs/iri_poll_4_results_arabic_ealestinian_women.doc (accessed March 23, 2012).

⁹³ Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2003), 7.

⁹⁴ Anat Berko, *The Path to Paradise: the Inner World of Suicide Bombers and Their Dispatchers* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), 115.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

According to a report by Israeli security sources posted on the website of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), successful and failed Palestinian female suicide bombers can be “both well educated professionals [or] common young women lacking education and a profession. However, in each and every case these women had a large amount of ‘personal baggage.’”⁹⁶ In order to prove the point, the site profiles failed and successful female bombers by their marital status, relationship with their families, fertility rates, sexual relations outside of marriage, physical disabilities and “other ‘shortcomings’ which would include belonging to families that carry with them the stain of collaboration, which obligates the woman’s sacrifice in order to cleanse the family name.”⁹⁷ As the Arab media praises and idolizes female suicide bombers for their patriotic and “unmatched heroism”, the Western and Israeli media characterizes the women who embark on such missions as “not whole women” and “social outcasts.”⁹⁸

The profiling of female suicide bombers by Western and Israeli scholars puts in stark relief how differently they view these women and their reasons for committing this action than do Palestinians.

The description of Wafa Idris by columnist Anne Marie Oliver is one such example. She writes that

In 2002...Wafa Idris...became the first Palestinian female suicide bomber. Idris has been forced into an arranged marriage by her elder brother. Like most other Palestinian women, she was dependent almost entirely on male relatives for her economic well-being and survival and had no choice but to accede to her brother’s decision. In her heart, however, she remained defiant and never accepted the marriage or her new husband, a first cousin. When she became pregnant against her will, she secretly aborted the child. On top of her unhappy marriage, abortion, and subsequent divorce, Idris was further traumatized by her weekly exposure to blood and death in her work as a paramedic for the Red Crescent, where she volunteered every Friday, caring for large numbers of Palestinians wounded during the second intifada.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Role of Palestinian women in Suicide Terrorism,” January 30, 2003, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2003/1/The%20Role%20of%20Palestinian%20Women%20in%20Suicide%20Terrorism (accessed March 13, 2012).

⁹⁷ Yoram Schweitzer, “Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Virtuous Heroines or Damaged Goods?,” in *Female, Terror, and Militancy*, ed. Cindy Ness (New York: Routledge, 2008), 133.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁹⁹ Anne Marie Oliver, “Brides of Palestine,” *Salon*, July 20, 2006, http://www.salon.com/2006/07/20/suicide_bombers/ (accessed January 19, 2012).

Marie Oliver provides her audience with a gendered narrative of Wafa Idris' life and even though she disparages the western media for focusing on the women's sexual secrets, her quote above demonstrates that she is guilty of the same.

The usual motives cited for carrying out a suicide bombing—humiliation, despair, revenge, hate, fame, money, religion, nationalism, the occupation and combinations thereof—are deemed insufficient to explain female bombers. Male suicide bombers, of course, often have their own unofficial motivations, but they rarely are the focus of a report. In contrast, the inner most recesses of a woman's psyche, her most shameful secrets—almost invariable sexual in nature—are displayed to a world eager for such an unveiling, eager to be shown that women do not truly relish [the act of suicide bombing].¹⁰⁰

Thus, while Marie Oliver questions the Western notion of describing female suicide bombing in a way that undermines the validity of any political motives, she nevertheless continues to view suicide bombing in a very personal and gender specific way.

Throughout *Army of Roses*, Victor continues to profile female suicide bombers in a way which highlights only gender-specific motivations. In order to prove her point that these women committed their actions due to personal redemption, she painstakingly documents these women's former lives by interviewing their friends, family, co-workers, and classmates and searches for gender-based personal reasons that would make them unhappy enough to want to die. She uses her interview tactics in each chapter to paint a picture for the reader that portrays female suicide bombers in a way that makes them seem marginalized and unvalued. For each successful female suicide bomber she describes (Wafa Idris, Ayat al-Akhras, Dareen Abu Aisheh, and Andalib Suleiman Takatka), Victor claims that deviation from expected gender norms forced these females to commit acts of suicide bombing in order to redeem themselves in the eyes of their community by their deaths of honor for murdering Israeli civilians.

The first successful female suicide bomber she introduces is the ubiquitous Wafa Idris. After her suicide attack on January 27, 2002, the Western and Israeli media dwelled on her divorce and alleged

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

inability to have children. In Victor's profiling of Idris, this is the number one reason for Idris' decision to carry out the suicide attack. She continuously questions Idris' mother, ex-husband, and friends regarding Idris' depression and melancholy related to her divorce and loss of her child. She also writes of the Palestinian societal limitations placed on Idris as a rejected woman without a husband or a child as a reason for her depression and sense of loss. This is evident in the quotes she uses to understand Idris' motivations. Idris's mother Mabrook tells her that

"[m]y daughter's husband divorced her because she couldn't have children.[...]Wafa knew she could never marry again because a divorced woman is tainted...She was young, intelligent, and beautiful and had nothing to live for."¹⁰¹

Victor then wonders if Idris had received psychological treatment for her divorce and loss of baby, perhaps she may not have decided to become a suicide bomber. Next, she interviews Itimad Abu Lidbeh, "Wafa's close friend," who tells her that

"When she lost her baby, she lost the will to live. I never understood why she reacted like that, but she did. She was a woman in enormous pain, and although she never said the words, I sensed she had no desire to go on living."¹⁰²

Finally, Victor interviews Mira Tzorref, a professor at Ben Gurion University whose research is in the field of women's history in the Middle East, who performs her own Western psychoanalysis on Idris.

"If we take Wafa Idris, the ultimate *shahida*, who is she after all? She is a talented young woman, married and divorced because she was sterile, desperate because she knew perfectly well there was no future for her in any aspect of the Palestinian society. She knew better than anyone else that the only way for her to come out against this miserable situation was to kill herself. Look at her funeral and what the Palestinian leadership said about her, calling her a national flower and the embodiment of Palestinian womanhood. She knew her own society and the limitations they put on her and on women like her and she understood better than anyone else that she had nothing left, no hope, no future."¹⁰³

The main problem with Victor's analysis of Idris and her interviews with Western and Israeli scholars and former members of Idris' life is that she neglects to take into account any nationalist or

¹⁰¹ Victor, *Army of Roses*, 41.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 47.

religious reasoning that Idris may have had behind her decision. Although she quotes other Western and Israeli scholars in her book as stating “the main factor for suicide attacks is the nationalist and religious influence,” she prefers to dismiss this only as motivations for Palestinian men and looks exclusively for gender-based explanations and motivations for Palestinian women.¹⁰⁴

Wafa Idris was not a new participant to the Palestinian struggle for liberation. Growing up in the al-Amari refugee camp in 1975, she witnessed cruel treatment by some Israeli soldiers to her Palestinian neighbors. When the first Intifada erupted in 1987, Idris was twelve years old. She became active in protests, serving on the camp’s women’s committee, helping to distribute food, and offering support to prisoner’s families.¹⁰⁵ She saw a childhood friend lose an eye in the fighting and another killed by rubber bullets. After the imprisonment of her brother as a member of Fatah, she became withdrawn and angry. All of this had “affected [her] very deeply.”¹⁰⁶

Many scholars often connect the witnessing of the first Intifada to the production of martyrdom in the second Intifada ten years later. Dr. Iyad Sarraj, a Palestinian psychologist from Gaza, acknowledges that

The children who threw stones and Molotov cocktails and confronted Israeli soldiers in 1987 [...] and who watched their fathers and other male relatives being beaten and humiliated by Israeli forces, are the young men [and women] who are the martyrs of today.¹⁰⁷

As she grew older, Idris volunteered as an emergency medical technician for the Palestinian Red Crescent. She was a member of a political women’s organization entitled the Fatah Mothers and had close familial ties to the al-Aqsa Martyr’s Brigade.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, when Wafa Idris committed her act of suicide bombing, it was not shocking news to her family and friends who recall

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰⁵ Katherine VanderKaay, “Girls Interrupted: The Making of Female Palestinian Suicide Bombers” in *Terror in the Holy Land*, ed. Judith Kuriansky (Westport, CT.: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 13.

¹⁰⁶ Victor, *Army of Roses*, 40.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 25.

Her love for her homeland and her love for her martyrdom was such that I don't think that if she had children it would have changed her mind [...] She was strong-willed and active and always wanted to join demonstrations. She would always say that she wished she could sacrifice herself for [Palestine].¹⁰⁹

Wafa Idris was not the only female suicide bomber who had a past history of political activism. Fifty-seven year old Fatima Omar Mahmud Al-Najar was a witness to the first intifada and a political activist in the second intifada. Mother of nine and grandmother to over forty grandchildren, Al-Najar's family had close connections to the Al-Qassam Brigade. Just twenty days before her detonation on November 23, 2006, in which she killed herself and wounded three Israeli soldiers, Al-Najar participated in "a daring rescue operation" staged by Palestinian women who acted as human shields to transport more than a dozen Palestinian gunmen trapped by Israeli soldiers inside a Beit Hanun mosque. Her daughter, Azhar, believes that her mother's decision to become a suicide bomber was in response to an incident on November 8, 2006, in which Israeli Defense Forces shells hit a row of houses in the Gaza Strip town of Beit Hanun, killing nineteen Palestinians and wounding forty others. Zuheir, one of Al-Najar's sons recalls that the night before her detonation, she told the family of her plans to execute the attack, stating "I don't want anything, only to die a martyr."¹¹⁰

Obviously, successful female suicide bombers are not around to be questioned about why they choose to undertake their actions and if their reasons for their detonations were caused by political issues or for personal redemption. In order to find out motives behind these attacks, scholars such as Yoram Schweitzer and Anat Berko have dedicated years to interviewing dispatchers of female suicide bombers who died as well as unsuccessful female suicide bombers now in Israeli prisons. It is through these interviews that we are able to get a glimpse into the lives of the women who committed or were about to commit these attacks, pushing past the stories and propaganda caused by the Palestinian cult

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹¹⁰ The Associated Press. "Palestinian Grandma Blows Self up in Gaza." *MSNBC*, November 23, 2006. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15869604/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/palestinian-grandmother-blows-self-gaza (accessed March 15, 2012).

of martyrdom, the feminists' gendered rationalizations, and the Western media's "damaged goods" explanations.

In Schweitzer's chapter "Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Virtuous Heroines or Damaged Goods?" he interviews the man responsible for choreographing Ayat al-Akhras's detonation as well as a few of his men, including the driver who escorted Al-Akhras to the site where she carried out her mission. He concludes that "there was no evidence that the main motive for her act was a desire to remove the stain cast upon her family—as [Journalist Barbara] Victor contended."¹¹¹ He also interviews Henadi Jaradat's dispatcher who, according to Schweitzer,

rejected the claim that Jaradat had committed her suicide attack as a result of being unwed at twenty-nine. Jaradat was described by him as a special young woman, very strong in her personality ('like a man'), with a serious mind...According to him, she did not marry due only to her sense of responsibility toward her family. He stated that she was responsible for the family's income since her father was a cancer patient. She postponed her personal plans so her brother could marry first and then planned to marry her fiancé. Jaradat's dispatcher also rejected the claim that since her fiancé was married, he was in fact her lover (and herein lies the hint that she was not normative). He said that the possibility of Jaradat and her fiancé having had premarital relations was unlikely in their society and 'what drove her to commit suicide was anger and revenge over her brother and fiancé having been killed.'¹¹²

Schweitzer also interviews Nasser Shawish of Fatah, a man who was personally involved in sending three suicide terrorists on a mission including Dareen Abu Aisha, a divorced, educated, and religiously pious woman who was determined to commit an attack. Schweitzer notes that

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

¹¹¹ Schweitzer, "Virtuous Heroines or Damaged Goods?", 136.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 136-137.

her part, Dureen 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.¹¹³

An anonymous Palestinian woman known as “*Lover of Al-Quds*” spoke on Al-Jadid/New TV in Lebanon with similar determination to commit a suicide attack against Israelis. During the TV report, the female reporter notes that

when the goal is the defense of the homeland, there is no difference between man and woman. Here [at training camps] women train and learn how to confront the [Israeli] enemy, which plundered the land and besieged their people. Dozens of young Palestinian women undergo training every year—university students, mothers, and working women. They know that their role in the conflict is not restricted to nursing the sick and caring for the children...¹¹⁴

The woman that she interviews who identifies herself by the pseudonym “*Lover of Al-Quds*” is veiled head to toe, with only her eyes shining at the TV cameras. About to be married, she claims that

Even if the Jews come on my wedding day, I will go out to confront them in my wedding gown. Nothing will stop me from committing martyrdom. I have given up all my dreams and aspirations, in order to become a martyrdom-seeker. I have lived an ordinary life. I have lots of free time, I go in and out, I draw – just like any other girl. But when it is the will of Allah that we become martyrs, I will cast all this aside.¹¹⁵

While personal motives of individual redemption cannot entirely be set aside, evidence rejects the notion that they are a main reason that Palestinian women choose to commit these attacks. Many women *and men* bombers express a desire for personal revenge, coupled with nationalist or religious motivations, as driving their actions. This is evident in the numerous interviews of unsuccessful Palestinian female suicide bomber Wafa Al-Bas. Al-Bas had been badly burned by a heater exploding in her family’s home in late 2004. Ironically, she was later treated at the Israeli Soroka Medical Center where she was asked by the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade to carry out a suicide attack when she went to receive her medical checkup. In her initial interview, Al-Bas declares, “I wanted to kill forty to fifty

¹¹³ Yoram Schweitzer, “Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Reality vs Myth,” in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, ed. Yoram Schweitzer (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2006), 28.

¹¹⁴ Al Jadid/New TV (Lebanon), “Women in Gaza Prepare to Become Suicide Bombers,” LiveLeak, August 19, 2008, http://liveleak.com/view?i=474_1219770661

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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." In another interview, Al-Bas states "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."

Although some scholars speculate that she despaired of ever marrying due to her disfigurement and scars, Al-Bas denies repeatedly through her interviews that her volunteering was connected to her scars and deformities. She does, however, admit to being fearful when she was threatened by her dispatchers for having second thoughts.¹¹⁶

Anat Berko notes about conducting interviews with unsuccessful Palestinian female suicide bombers that "most of the women who remained alive said their main motives were religion and the desire to participate in the national struggle," acknowledging that "even Fatima [one of her interviewees], who cried and regretted her actions when she was incarcerated, had, within a few months, adopted a different outlook and was proud of what she had done, at least when other people were listening."¹¹⁷ Due to the complex psychological nature of suicide bombing, one can never be certain of the true reason these women choose to commit their actions. Rumors circulate of affairs and secreted pregnancies and, in cases such as that of Thoria Khamour, there are documented histories of past mental instability and suicide attempts. But analysis of the back stories of both those who successfully detonated their bombs and those who were caught demonstrate that not all of these women necessarily "had a large amount of personal baggage."¹¹⁸

In the case of those women who might be considered "damaged goods" with some sort of emotional trauma in their backgrounds as a motivation to commit a suicide attack, Yoram Schweitzer

¹¹⁶ Schweitzer, "Virtuous Heroines or Damaged Goods?," 138.

¹¹⁷ Berko, *The Path to Paradise*, 115.

¹¹⁸ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Role of Palestinian women in Suicide Terrorism," January 30, 2003, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFArchive/2000_2009/2003/1/The%20Role%20of%20Palestinian%20Women%20in%20Suicide%20Terrorism (accessed March 13, 2012).

does not differentiate between genders. He notes that “situational weaknesses of the potential suicide bombers [both male and female], even those who volunteered for their missions (and certainly those who were coerced into these actions), are neither disregarded nor channeled to less-destructive ends. Instead, they are seized upon and aggravated by those dispatching them for greater organizational purposes.”¹¹⁹ Therefore men with “personal baggage” and previously documented mental instability can be taken advantage by recruiters in the same context as their female counterparts.

The Palestinian Female Suicide Bomber (PFSB) chart below covers fourteen Palestinian female suicide bombers, ten of whom were successful and four who were caught before detonation or trying to detonate. There is obviously more information about the unsuccessful bombers who gave the most prison interviews and received media coverage using their personal names compared to others who had refused to be interviewed while in prison, whose coverage was not as widespread, or who chose to remain anonymous and cannot be identified through various interviews and their varied pseudonyms. In constructing the chart, I used a variety of sources, both media and scholarly as well as Palestinian and Israeli/Western. Divided into two categories by color (purple represents gender-based backgrounds and orange represents non-gender/gender neutral specific backgrounds), this chart does not claim to reveal the motivations for the fourteen Palestinian female suicide bombers. It does, however, present the background of each individual from a variety of sources for the sake of comparison. Analysis of the chart suggests that there are more nationalist factors (exposure to political trauma induced by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, family or friend affiliation to Palestinian political organizations, and recorded former political activity) in these women’s lives than gendered ones (divorce, infertility, rape or alleged relations with men outside of marriage) that would be deciding influences for them to undertake their attacks. Contrary to the popular belief that all Palestinian female suicide bombers are damaged goods,

¹¹⁹ Schweitzer, “Virtuous Heroines or Damaged Goods?”, 143.

my chart proves that there are factors absent of gender that appear more frequently in their backgrounds. While only three were reported or rumored to be divorced, eight had recorded former political activity (including two of the divorcees) (see chart). Five of these women were rumored to have been raped or to have had relations with men outside of marriage, although those allegations are often unconfirmed and sometimes even flatly contradicted by other reports. More significantly, twelve of the fourteen bombers had family or friends affiliated with Palestinian political organizations such as Fatah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Thirteen of the fourteen had been exposed to political trauma induced by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Name	Date	Divorced	Infertile	Rumored/ Report Rape or Sexual Relations with Men Outside of Marriage	Mental Instability	Exposure to Political Trauma Induced by Palestinian- Israeli conflict	Family/Friend reported affiliation with Political organization	Recorded former Political activity
Wafa Idris	1/27/02 Success	X	X			X	X	X
Ayat Al-Akhras	3/29/02 Success			X		X	X	
Andalib Suleiman Al-Taqtiah	4/12/02 Success			X		X	X	X
Dareen Abu Aisheh	2/27/02 Success	X				X	X	X
Hanadi Tayseer Jaradat	10/04/03 Success					X	X	X
Reem Salid Al-Rayasha	1/14/04 Success			X		X	X	X
Zeinab Abu Salem	10/22/04 Success					X		

Name	Date	Divorced	Infertile	Rumored/ Report Rape or Sexual Relations with Men Outside of Marriage	Mental Instability	Exposure to Political Trauma Induced by Palestinian- Israeli conflict	Family/Friend reported affiliation with Political organization	Recorded former Political activity
Haba Azem Daraghmeh	5/19/03 Success			X		X	X	X
Mervat Masoud	11/06/06 Success					X	X	X
Fatima Omar Mahmud Al-Najar	11/23/06 Success					X	X	X
Wafa Al- Bas	6/21/05 Arrested			X	X		X	
Thouria Khamour	5/19/02 Arrested				X	X		
Arin Ahmed	5/22/02 Arrested					X	X	
Shifaa Al- Koudsi	4/11/02 Arrested	X				X	X	

See appendix C for a breakdown of which sources reported on which profile components.

Similar to Palestinian male suicide bombers, females record farewell videos before their acts of eruption. These “martyrdom” videos provide us with a glimpse of the last words and hours of each detonator. Regardless of the organization with which they are affiliated, the bombers mirror each other in nationalistic rhetoric and visual displays of weapons and patriotic aesthetics. Women as well as men hold copies of the Qur’an and Kalashnikov assault rifles, wear green colored headbands, and repeat words pertaining to the destructiveness of their bodies and their desire to explode and kill Israelis. In April 2002, Andaleeb Takatka stated in her farewell video

[W]hen you want to carry out such an attack, whether you are a man or a woman, you don't think about the explosive belt or about your body being ripped into pieces. We are suffering. We are dying while we are still alive.

Echoing that statement in a video recorded in December 2008, Hamas operative Umm Suheib proclaims

I, the martyrdom-seeker Umm Suheib, have dedicated myself for the sake of Allah, and for the sake of redeeming my family, from which I have lost eight martyrs so far. I swear by Allah that I will turn my body parts into a fire that will burn the occupation soldiers, if they move towards my house.

These statements of exploding bodies are so gender neutral that they can easily be voiced by Palestinian males or females.

Another element that is problematic when addressing gendered based explanations of Palestinian female suicide bombers is the celebrity status they enjoy after their deaths. To show that female suicide bombers were exploited or "sought out their suicide mission in desperation" would still not explain the popular Palestinian culture of martyrdom and the rising interest that Palestinian female youth, ranging across all strata of Palestinian society, express in being martyrs.¹²⁰ Senior Hamas leader Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi described this as "a craving, a wave of craving among women," where "thousands of [Palestinian] women [are] looking forward to the day on which they can make a sacrifice on behalf of the children, women, and elderly who [are] being killed daily."¹²¹ Now young Palestinian girls express the same aspirations of martyrdom as young Palestinian boys. Since the self-detonation of the first Palestinian female suicide bomber Wafa Idris, it is not uncommon for very young Palestinian girls to voice their desires to become shahidat, articulating that they hope to become martyrs in order "to follow my brother...in honor of Wafa Idris, who proved that women can do as much as men...to give back to my country everything I can...[and] to free my people from occupation...[as] there is no hope for

¹²⁰ Ness, "In the Name of the Cause," 28.

¹²¹ Ibid.

peace.”¹²² If Palestinian female suicide bombers are praised highly in their society and looked up to by younger females, then the notion that “these women do not have agency...[and] are manipulated by men who recruit [them because they] have shamed their families or are not fulfilling the female role in Palestinian society in some way” is inaccurate.¹²³ Hopelessness and unremitting occupation can motivate men or women to undertake extreme action, especially if that action is highly celebrated in Palestinian society.

The complex nature of suicide terrorism requires scholars and the media to examine every possible explanation, including gendered explanations, for possible motivations that would drive one person to murder others, generally innocent civilians, by killing him or herself. As Palestinian women continued their political participation in the struggle for Arab independence since the early twentieth century to a more direct and militant approach in the second intifada, female suicide terrorism is a logical extension of the historical continuum of women being similarly active as males in the Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation. Winning praise for stepping outside of patriarchal gender restrictions does not mean, however, that the status of females has changed in Palestinian society. As evidenced by the first intifada, women were only able to leave their homes and enter the public sphere if they were acting as political participants. Even then, their roles were directly regulated by Palestinian males who determined how they engaged and when they were allowed to collaborate.

Today, Palestinian society, as well as the Arab world, celebrates individual Palestinian female suicide bombers such as Wafa Idris, Ayat al-Akhras, and the eight others who committed their acts of “martyrdom”, but praises them in a traditional fashion by remarking on their beauty, purity, and overall femininity. Although they are highly regarded, their deaths and their limited roles as suicide bombers do not result in any structural changes of gender relations in Palestinian society. These Palestinian female

¹²² Berko, *The Path to Paradise*, 188-189.

¹²³ Whaley-Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorism*, 193.

suicide bombers, then, must commit their actions with priorities other than advancing women's issues. The Western and Israeli media, as well as some notable scholars, often argue that these Palestinian women who decide to become suicide bombers commit their acts for individual redemption, since Palestinian society refused to allow them to live normal lives as divorced, barren, and otherwise disgraced women. This school of thought argues that these women believe that their only option to overcome their obstacles and redeem their honor and their family's honor is through suicide bombing. But evidenced by interviews with unsuccessful Palestinian female suicide bombers and close friends and relatives of ones that were able to detonate, this was almost never the case and never the single factor in their personal and political profiles.

Analysis of the PFSB Chart leads to the conclusion that gendered explanation simply do not work for the majority of these women. Fifty-seven percent were not divorced, infertile, reported to have relations with men outside of marriage, or had not dishonored their families in any way. Two were documented as mentally unstable with previous suicide attempts before they decided to become suicide bombers. Nearly one hundred percent, however, were exposed to political trauma induced by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (i.e. losing a relative, witnessing destruction by Israeli soldiers, etc.) and thus possibly interested in revenge, had family or friends affiliated with Palestinian political organizations, or were recorded to be formerly politically active themselves.

Palestinian women who chose to become suicide bombers were acting for reasons other than gendered ones. These reasons stemmed from the variety of motivational causes mentioned, such as revenge, long-standing political activism, familial affiliation with resistance groups, or personal trauma in the conflict with Israel, all of which fall under the rubric of nationalism, and all of which male suicide bombers routinely reference in their farewell videos or jailhouse interviews. There is no justification to believe that when Andaleeb Takatkeh made her martyr's video, wearing a black and white checkered keffiyeh with a drawing of the Al-Aqsa Mosque behind her, and declared that "I've chosen to say with

my body what Arab leaders have failed to say...My body of gun powder that burns the enemy," she was referring to her own feminine physique.¹²⁴ In fact, the exploding bodies that burn the enemy are interchangeably male or female.

Appendix A



Lelia Khaled posing with Rifle.
Credit: www.leilakhalid.com

Appendix B

¹²⁴ Hasso, "Discourse and Political Deployment," 29.



Dala Said Al Mughrabi

Credit: The Palestinian Poster Project Archives <http://www.palestineposterproject.org/>

Appendix C

Palestinian Female Suicide Bomber (PFSB) Chart

Name	Date	Divorced	Infertile	Rumored/ Report Rape or Sexual Relations with Men Outside of Marriage	Mental Instability	Exposure to Political Trauma Induced by Palestinian -Israeli conflict	Family/Friend reported affiliation with Political organization	Recorded former Political activity	Notes
Wafa Idris	1/27/02 Success	1,11,12,7 ,6,5,4,2,1 4, 18	1,11,12, 9,7,6,5, 4,2,14, 18			11,9,7,5,4,14, 1, 18	11,9,7,4,14, 18	14,1, 18	activist in Fatah (9) three brothers all members of Fatah (14) active in first Intifada (18)
Ayat Al- Akhras	3/29/02 Success			14		9,1,4,15, 18	9,4, 18		witnessed brother's death (9)
Andalib Suleiman Al- Taqatqah	4/12/02 Success			12,9,4,14		9,1,4,15, 18	18	9	member of Fatah (9) witnessed home of cousins demolished (9)
Dareen Abu Aisheh	2/27/02 Success	9,14				9,7,5,4, 18	9,4, 18	13,10, 18	said to be long time political activist by close family and friends (13) never married and had no reported male associations (18)
Hanadi Tayseer Jaradat	10/04/03 Success					9,5,4,2, 18	9,14, 18	13	activist in Islamic Jihad (13)
Reem Salid Al-Rayasha	1/14/04 Success			12,11,8,5,4,1 4		14	13,14	13,14	long time Hamas activist (13) husband insisted wife was an honorable woman (18)

Zeinab Abu Salem	10/22/04 Success					18			little is known about her life, no mourning tents or ceremonies after detonation, family went into hiding for fear of retaliation (18)
Haba Azem Daraghmeh	5/19/03 Success			5,4,1,2		9,2, 18	9,2, 18	9, 18	affiliated with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (9) raped at age 14 (5)
Mervat Masoud	11/06/06 Success					9,4	9	4	member of Al-Quds brigade (4)
Fatima Omar Mahmud Al-Najar	11/23/06 Success					9,4,14	9	9,14,16	participant in mosque barricade in Beit Hannoun (9) led women's demonstrations in Beit Hannoun (16)
Wafa Al-Bas	6/21/05 Arrested			2	2,14,17		6		denied volunteering due to burns/scars (8) emotional problems before and during prison (2) previous suicide attempt (17)
Thouria Khamour	5/19/02 Arrested				8,2	2			family objects to man she wishes to marry (8) tried self-harm twice (8) recorded as Fatima, given nickname "fatima pokemon" in prison (2)
Arin Ahmed	5/22/02 Arrested					8,7,3	7,3		
Shifaa Al-Koudsi	4/11/02 Arrested	7,17				7,2,17	2,17		

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