**Analysis: Palestinian suicide attacks**

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Palestinian suicide bomb attacks against Israelis aim to kill and injure as many people as possible, and create the greatest amount of fear. The victims are, most often, civilians going about their daily life.

In the early years of the intifada, or Palestinian uprising, such attacks became one of the hallmarks of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - although their frequency fell after an unofficial ceasefire by some of the most powerful Palestinian militant groups in 2005.

Across the world, the bombings have been widely condemned as brutal acts of terrorism - though the attacks are pointedly not condemned by some Arab or Islamic governments.

Palestinian officials have routinely condemned suicide attacks, though they tend to phrase this in terms of condemnation of the killings of all civilians on both side.

They have also often been accused by Israel of not doing enough to stop the attackers and of celebrating their "martyrdom".

Israel has accused the Palestinian Authority of funding some suicide attacks and rewarding the families of attackers. Evidence for this has been sketchy.

Suicide attacks routinely draw a severe military response from the Israeli army ranging from direct attacks against alleged militants or the planners of attacks to 24-hour curfews in urban areas.

'Bringing the war to Israel'

For the attackers and the organisations that send them on their missions, the horror, death and destruction is precisely the point.

Yahya Ayyash, a leading Hamas bomb maker who was killed by Israel in 1996, was quoted as saying that the use of "human bombs" was a way to "make the [Israeli] occupation that much more expensive in human lives, that much more unbearable".

Many Palestinians see suicide attacks as the only form of armed resistance to occupation available to them, given the vast superiority of the Israeli army.

Palestinians often attempt to explain the attacks as desperate acts or revenge born of their suffering under occupation. They point to the large number of Palestinian civilian deaths as a result of actions by the Israeli army.

Polls taken in the West Bank and Gaza have in recent years suggested that about 60% of Palestinians support suicide attacks to some degree.

At the beginning of 2005, when the Palestinian and Israeli leaders declared a ceasefire after four years of the Palestinian intifada or uprising, the leading Palestinian militant group Hamas declared it would "respect calm" - though it reserved the right to respond to Israeli attacks. Other groups followed suite.

History of attacks

The first Palestinian suicide attack in Israel killed eight people in April 1994 in the centre of Afula.

Hamas said it carried out the attack in response to the killing of 29 praying Muslims in February of that year by Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein in the West Bank city of Hebron.

Between 1994 and September 2000, the beginning of the Palestinian intifada or uprising, some 120 Israelis were killed in suicide attacks.

The number of attacks greatly increased during the intifada.

In the first three years, the Israeli foreign ministry counted 73 "mass murder attacks" (including suicide and car bombings) which killed about 300 people.

The number of attacks fell as Israel besieged Palestinian towns and pressed ahead with its barrier in and around the occupied West Bank.

In 2003, there were 26 attacks leaving 144 dead. In 2004, there were 15 attacks and 55 dead.

With the unofficial ceasefire, the number of attacks in 2005 fell to just seven, claiming the lives of 23 Israelis. And in 2006 there were just two attacks, one of which killed nine people.

Militant groups

Until February 2005, the main organisations behind the suicide attacks were Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade - which is linked to the mainstream Fatah movement - and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Of these, Hamas attacks appeared to have been characterised by the most careful planning, rigorous training and ruthless execution.

The bloodiest such attack occurred on 27 March 2002, when Abdelbasset Odeh blew up a Passover holiday dinner at the Park Hotel in Netanya.

Thirty diners - many of them elderly - died in the attack. More than 100 people were injured, including 20 seriously.

The last Hamas attack was a double suicide bombing on two buses in the southern Israeli town of Beersheba in August 2004 that left 16 dead.

Unlike Hamas, Islamic Jihad rejected the 2005 ceasefire and has kept sending suicide bombers to attack Israel, in keeping with its ideology that the Arab-Israeli conflict will only be resolved through violence and armed confrontation.

The attackers

Suicide bombers are typically unmarried men in their 20s - though there have been a number of attacks by women.

The individual bombers do not necessarily have a background of being religiously devout, but their actions are almost always framed as acts of self-martyrdom.

For the attackers and the groups that send them, this gives their deaths religious sanction and means their suicide can be celebrated.

The attackers, who are often recorded on video declaring their intentions to murder Israelis, most often cast their attacks as acts of revenge and seem to believe that they will go straight to paradise.

Part of the pact between a bomber and the group that sends him is that the attacker's death will be celebrated and his family provided for.

Suicide attacks are often launched at short notice.

The group behind the attack will usually select a target, arrange for the transport of the bomber into Israel and supply the explosive device.

Explosives are usually wrapped closely around the attacker or sewn into clothing.

Countering the bombers

Israel has adopted a range of military measures in the age of suicide bombing - none of which have been entirely successful and several of which are criticised by human rights groups as collective punishment.

One tactic has been the widescale re-occupation of the West Bank and blockading Palestinian towns.

Israel has also executed many "targeted assassinations" of militants, an approach it has employed since the 1970s.

The Israeli authorities say the tactic is a legitimate one because those killed by their security forces are directly involved in the planning and execution of attacks on Israeli civilians.

Opponents say the assassinations are extra-judicial killings which often have civilian victims and appear actually to provoke violence rather than prevent suicide attacks.

Other staple measures are raids against suspected militants plotting attacks, mass arrests, curfews, and stringent travel restrictions.

In the past, Israeli forces usually demolished the home of the suicide bomber's family. However, this policy was curtailed in 2005 after an army committee said it had little deterrent effect and inflamed Palestinian hatred.

Israel's leaders appear to have ultimately come to the conclusion that only physical separation with the Palestinians can solve the problem of human bombs.

In 2003, Israel started work on its 650-km (400-mile) security barrier in and around the West Bank.

Palestinians and their supporters claim the structure is a prelude to annexation of the parts of the occupied land which lie on the western, "Israeli" side of the barrier route.