

Inside the mind of a suicide bomber

Certain personality types are more likely to become martyrs, Ariel Merari tells Michael Bond



ANKARAWAD/REUTERS

It has been thought that suicide terrorists are not psychologically different from other terrorists, but your latest research on Palestinian would-be bombers who failed to blow themselves up suggests otherwise. What did you find? They seem to have certain personality characteristics that make them more likely to be recruited to or to volunteer for suicide-bombing missions. None of the 15 would-be suicide bombers we interviewed suffered from a psychosis, but they had one of two personality types. Two-thirds were dependent-avoidant:

such people find it hard to say no to authority figures and are more likely to cooperate to carry out tasks against their own judgement. They are also greatly influenced by public opinion. The rest were impulsive and emotionally unstable. These types are likely to volunteer, but in many cases their enthusiasm will not last long enough for them to see it through.

Were they militantly ideological?

None were any more militant than the average Palestinian. For many, the suicide mission was their first involvement in

Posters proclaim 18-year-old suicide bomber Sami Salim Hamad as a martyr terrorism. Ideological motivation was not what made them suicide bombers. Two-thirds hesitated somewhere along the line, though this was caused by fear of death and worry about their families.

How are they able to see the operation through to the end? Some of them apparently enter a psychological state known as a dissociation, in which they shut themselves off to disturbing thoughts. One bomber, who tried to blow himself up on a bus, told us he was afraid from the moment he was recruited, and that his fear grew as the operation drew near. But he says he does not remember anything from the moment he stepped onto the bus. I believe him. We know what happened from the passengers. He walked to the middle of the bus and tried to activate the explosive charge but it didn't work. He pressed it again and again. People were all over him, he was kicking and fighting and shouting. But he remembers nothing. He had shut himself off because he was in a terrible conflict.

You also interviewed 14 organisers of suicide attacks, all of them senior commanders of Palestinian militant groups. How does their psychology compare?

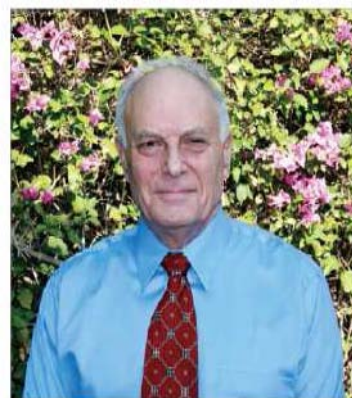
Their psychology is very different. They are not dependent – they are manipulative. They are much more intelligent than the bombers and are also older – 27 on average in our study, compared with 19 for the bombers. Some had university education. They

were not psychopathic. They were very pragmatic, they believed they were doing it for their nation and that it was the right thing to do. They did not express any moral doubts about it.

How did you feel talking to them?

The would-be bombers did not look how you would imagine typical murderers. They looked like pitiable young boys. There is no air of malice around them. In interviews they were usually kind and polite. I saw them as people who were manipulated.

With the organisers it was different. I knew these were the people who sent youngsters to kill innocent civilians, though I could still relate to them as human beings. In a way I was dissociated from them. If you want to really understand what motivates people, you cannot be judgemental when you talk to them. I could not think about the terrible human aspect of what they did. ■



PROFILE

Ariel Merari is retired professor of psychology at Tel Aviv University in Israel. His latest book, *Driven to Death: Psychological and social aspects of suicide terrorism*, is published by Oxford University Press.