

Film Guide

Suicide Bombers: Inside the Minds of Failed Martyrs

June 2013



Abstract

This film guide provides a teaching and learning overview of *Suicide Bombers: Inside the Minds of Failed Martyrs*, a 2004 documentary that examines the backgrounds, motivations, training, and political and religious beliefs of five Palestinian suicide bombers dedicated to attacking Israel. The documentary also explores the challenges Israeli security forces must confront in responding to such attacks. In addition, Sari Nusseibeh, president of Al-Quds University, speaks about the root causes of suicide bombings and how the trend may be minimized. The film guide includes a synopsis of the film, historical context for the events the film documents, profiles of the five men in the film, a list of key terms, discussion questions, and a list of supplemental readings for further information on the subject.

About this Film Guide

This film guide was crafted under the editorial direction of Eric Patterson, visiting assistant professor in the Department of Government and associate director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

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Citation

Title: *Suicide Bombers: Inside the Minds of Failed Martyrs*

Genre: Documentary

Original Release: 2004

Run Time: 57 minutes

Senior Producer: Andy Halper

Language: English/English Translation

DVD Release: 2004

Editor: Paul Carlin

SUICIDE BOMBERS: INSIDE THE MINDS OF FAILED MARTYRS (2004)

SYNOPSIS

The documentary film *Suicide Bombers: Inside the Minds of Failed Martyrs* explores the motives of failed Palestinian suicide bombers who are now held in Israeli prisons. Apprehended by Israeli security forces, the five men, including three failed suicide bombers, a recruiter, and a bomb builder, describe the circumstances that led to their attempted attacks on Israeli targets. The men speak openly and forcefully about their training, motivation, and desire to become martyrs for Islam, as well as their underlying hatred for Jews and the state of Israel. The documentary also exposes the complexities of the beliefs of the Palestinian prisoners and how their views on Israel have in some cases changed or hardened. The president of Al-Quds University, Sari Nusseibeh, provides an added dimension of perspective by discussing the factors that have led to the prevalence of suicide bombings and how the phenomenon might be curtailed.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Who are the Jews?

Judaism is an ethnoreligious tradition centered on the idea of a covenant between God and the Jewish people that can be traced back to the prophets Abraham and Moses. The Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) and an extensive interpretative literature (Mishna and Talmud) outline the laws and practices that provide a basis for the different contemporary currents of Judaism, including Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Judaism is the oldest of the Abrahamic faiths and the small-

est of the world's major religions, with approximately 15 million adherents. The United States and Israel have the largest Jewish populations, together accounting for about 75 percent of the worldwide total.¹

Who are the Arabs?

The term Arab has both historical and cultural meanings. Arabs as well as Jews consider themselves to be descendants of the patriarch, Abraham. Arabs trace their lineage to Ishmael, Abraham's first son, while Jews are traceable to Abraham's son Isaac. According to the Hebrew Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament, the term Arab describes the nomadic inhabitants of the central and northern Arabian Peninsula.²

Currently, Arabs consider themselves to be a people and a national group although they do not form a single nation-state; Arab can be applied both to those who speak Arabic and who identify with Arab culture and causes. Arabs are a majority population in many modern nation-states (Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen). Today there are nearly 300 million people in the region from Morocco to Iraq who consider themselves Arab. (Only about one-fifth of the world's 1.2 to 1.4 billion Muslims are Arab).³

The State of Israel

The historic Jewish polity was wiped out by the Romans in 70 CE. The modern state of Israel is the world's only predominantly Jewish state

and the Israeli government defines it as a Jewish and democratic state. The development of the modern state of Israel traces back to the 1917 Balfour Declaration. Issued during World War I, the Balfour Declaration was a letter written by the British government to Lord Rothschild of the British Zionist Federation. The Balfour Declaration affirms British support of a national homeland for the Jewish people to be located in Palestine. Roughly 20 years later, at the conclusion of World War II, the British withdrew from their mandate of Palestine and the UN partitioned the region into Jewish and Arab states, a plan rejected by the Arabs but which resulted in Israel declaring its independence as a state in 1948.⁴

Palestine

The historical land of Palestine is roughly co-extensive with the modern state of Israel. Over the course of its history, Palestine has been occupied and ruled by Hebrews, Egyptians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, and Turks. More recently, the West Bank was annexed by Jordan in 1950 and occupied by Israel in 1967 as part of the Six-Day War. In 1988, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), then led by Yasser Arafat, announced its plan to form an Arab state of Palestine, which would likely include the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Arab portion of the city of Jerusalem. With the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and 1995, the Palestinians established limited self-rule in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Further negotiations were postponed when fighting broke out between Palestinian militants and Israeli forces in 2000. At the moment, Palestine is not a formal nation-state with full recognition by the international community.

Overview of the Arab-Israeli conflict

Tensions between the Jews and Arabs began to increase after the British issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Among other major developments, this public statement on behalf of the

British government permitted large-scale Jewish immigration to Palestine and afforded property rights to Jews, i.e., the ability for Jews to legally buy land in Palestine. Thus, two groups of people expressing different ethnic and national identities but claiming the same (relatively small) piece of land began to form the basis for the current conflict.

After World War II, Jews asserted that the tragedy of the Holocaust clearly established a need for Jews to have a country of their own: a modern state of Israel.⁵ Though episodes of violence between Jewish settlers, Arab Muslims, and British authorities had already been occurring for more than ten years, the beginning of prolonged, intense, and distinctly Israeli-Palestinian conflict is considered to be 1948, when Israel gained formal independence. Since that time, the Arab-Israeli conflict has resulted in six different wars occurring in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1969 to 1970, 1973, and 1982.⁶

Local Arab leaders, or Palestinians, have increasingly identified as a Palestinian nation since the founding of Israel in 1948. They, like the Jewish population, claim to have lived in the area of Palestine for centuries. When the Balfour Declaration was issued, 90 percent of the people living in Palestine were Arab. After World War II, although some high-ranking Arab leaders⁷ declared sympathy for the plight of the Jews, their argument was that the British had no right to make a promise to the Jews at the expense of the Arab population. Although the Holocaust was horrendous, Europeans committed the atrocities—why then, Arabs argued, should the Arab world have to pay the price? However, during World War II, many senior Arab leaders, most notably the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Mohammad Amin al-Husayni, led violent opposition to Zionism and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Al-Husayni supported the Nazis as early as 1937 when he fled from Palestine to Baghdad when he was wanted for by the British.⁸

PROFILES OF THE FILM'S SUICIDE BOMBERS

Mohammad Abu Tiun

- Time in film: 4:19

- Age: 18

Mohammad is a failed suicide bomber. Prior to voluntarily quitting his mission after deciding he no longer wanted to kill Israeli civilians, he believed that by committing a suicide attack he would become a martyr for God. Mohammad wanted to go to “paradise” and get everything he desired, including access to “70 virgins.” Mohammad also describes the life of a Palestinian as “worthless.” From his perspective, whereas Israelis can go to cafes and travel, the quality of life for Palestinians is very low.

Muas Abu Shark

- Time in film: 15:35

- Age: 24

A former student and recruiter of suicide bombers, Muas believes that it is the “duty of every Muslim” to liberate Palestine and any other occupied Muslim land. Muas believes that upon death, a martyr’s soul rises to heaven and is greeted by God.

Mashdi Amir

- Time in film: 16:10

- Age: 25

Mashdi is a professional engineer and bomb builder. He is motivated to put an end to the State of Israel, which he compares to a “Nazi” occupation. Mashdi explains that if the Israelis attack Palestinians, he will attack Israelis. Claiming to be a “person of peace,” Mashdi says that he is defending his land and right to live freely. He views the situation in Palestine as one in which he has no choice and that he must create a balance of power.

Amir Muhammad Anis Jerradat

- Time in film: 26:20

- Age: 19

Amir is a failed suicide bomber. He was spotted by Israeli security forces before his attempted attack and had to return home (his family later convinced him to turn himself in). Amir wants to be a martyr for God and believes that because the Israelis kill the young and the old, the Palestinians must also kill Israeli civilians.

Bilal Kamal Ali

- Time in film: 33:40

- Age: 17

Bilal is a failed suicide bomber. His motivation stems, in part, from an event in which he saw the body of a dead person who appeared to be smiling. As a result, Bilal associated martyrdom with the reward of going to paradise after death. He wanted to commit his attack before changing his mind. Bilal claims to have pressed the button to ignite his bomb but the explosive failed to detonate. Born in Kuwait and raised in Jordan, Bilal came to the West Bank just prior to the Second Intifada, which began in September of 2000. Bilal says that if he is let out of prison in the future, he would likely return to Jordan and that he no longer wants to stay in Palestine.

KEY TERMS

Identify and discuss the following:

Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)

Mohammad Amin al-Husayni

Balfour Declaration

Oslo Peace Accords

Martyrdom

Yasser Arafat

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the most common religious motivations expressed among Palestinian suicide bombers in this film? Why do these particular motivations seem to be the most powerful? What makes religious motivations so attractive for the men in the film?
2. Aside from religious motivations, some of the Palestinians express a desire to achieve political objectives through suicide attacks. What are some of the specific political goals that inspire these attacks? From your perspective, do suicide attacks seem to be effective in meeting Palestinian political objectives?
3. Aside from religious motivations, some of the Palestinians express a desire to achieve political objectives through suicide attacks. What are some of the specific political goals that inspire these attacks? From your perspective, do suicide attacks seem to be effective in meeting Palestinian political objectives?
4. The documentary explains that the state of Israel experiences more suicide attacks than any other nation in the world. Of course, there are many conflicts around the world that produce greater death tolls, only not through suicide attacks. What factors make Israel such a target for suicide attacks?
5. What are Sari Nusseibeh's suggestions for reducing suicide bombings and minimizing the damage of the Arab-Israeli conflict? Do his suggested solutions address the stated motives of the suicide bombers? What would you add to his suggestions?

FURTHER READINGS

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¹<http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/traditions/judaism>

²Bickerton, Ian J., and Carla L. Klausner. 2010. *A History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. Sixth Edition ed. New York, USA: Prentice Hall, pp. 4.

³Bickerton, Ian J., and Carla L. Klausner. 2010. *A History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. Sixth Edition ed. New York, USA: Prentice Hall, pp. 4.

⁴<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/is.html>

⁵Nye, JR, Joseph S. 2003. *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History*. Fourth Edition ed. New York, USA: Longman.

⁶Nye, JR, Joseph S. 2003. *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History*. Fourth Edition ed. New York, USA: Longman.

⁷In the 1919 Feisal-Weizmann Agreement, Prince Feisal bin al-Hussein bin Ali al-Hashemi declared that "We Arabs...look with the deepest sympathy on the Zionist movement."

⁸Bickerton, Ian J., and Carla L. Klausner. 2010. *A History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. Sixth Edition ed. New York, USA: Prentice Hall, pp. 46.