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— Lebanon —



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Arabic

Secretary General

Leaders

Conflict with Israel

Statments & Positions

Parliament Activities

Daily News

Hostages

Wounded

Martyrs

Audio & Video

Gallery

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Suicide (martyrdom) bombers usually neither mad, fanatical nor poor: scientists*

AFP, 12-5-2004

PARIS - Suicide (martyrdom) bombers who have sown mayhem from "Israel" to Iraq and from Chechnya to Sri Lanka are usually far from being the madmen, religious fanatics or impoverished misfits they are often portrayed as, it was reported.

The British science weekly New Scientist says that experts who have studied the psychological profiles and backgrounds of suicide (martyrdom) bombers find these assailants are often secular, well-educated individuals.¶

Many of them are born to prosperous families and take a rational decision about the path they chose, says a report in this Saturday's issue.¶

"What this amounts to is in many ways more alarming than the ubiquitous misperception of the suicide (martyrdom) bomber as fanatical," New Scientist says. "It means that in the right circumstances, anyone could be one."¶

A study of Hamas and Palestinian suicide (martyrdom) attackers from the 1980s to 2003 by Claude Berrebi, an economist at Princeton University, found that only 13 percent of them came from a poor background, compared with 32 percent of the Palestinian population in general.¶

In addition, more than half the suicide (martyrdom) bombers had entered further education, compared with just 15 percent of the general population.¶

Similarly, a study into Hizbullah militants who died in action in Lebanon in the 1980s and 1990s were less like to have come from poor families and likelier to have attended secondary school than others of their age.¶

As for the idea that suicide (martyrdom) bombers are simply suicidal, that is discounted by "Israeli" psychologist Ariel Merari of Tel Aviv University.¶

He studied the backgrounds of every suicide (martyrdom) bomber in the Middle East since 1983, when the modern era of suicide (martyrdom) attacks began with the truck bomb assault US embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people.¶

"In the majority, you find none of the risk factors normally associated with suicide (martyrdom), such as mood disorders or schizophrenia, substance abuse or history of attempted suicide (martyrdom)," Merari told New Scientist.¶

Eyad El Sarraj, chairman of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, said his own studies of Palestinian "martyrs" found a common source in a traumatic childhood experience.¶

All had experienced helplessness as a child, particularly the humiliation of their father by

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“Israeli” soldiers.¶

Whatever the individual trigger, suicide (martyrdom) bombers are invariably channeled by a disciplined, well-organized group into taking the path of self destruction in the fight against the enemy, the report says.¶

This group, a result of a "peculiar mix of social, cultural and political ingredients," forges and promotes the cult of the suicide (martyrdom) bomber, glorifying his or her acts within the community and indoctrinating him or her, often with promises of divine reward.¶

This "brotherhood mentality" is typically reinforced at the crucial moment by a farewell testimony in a letter or video.¶

"If you are in a small cell of suicide (martyrdom) bombers and they are all dying one by one, and you have made this commitment on a videotape saying goodbye to your family and everyone else, the psychological investment is such that it would be almost impossibly humiliating to pull back," Scott Atran, an anthropologist at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, said.¶

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