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## What makes bombers tick?

May 14, 2004

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Suicide bombers are usually far from being madmen, religious fanatics or impoverished misfits, *New Scientist* says.

The British science weekly says experts who have studied the psychological profiles and backgrounds of suicide bombers find they are often secular and well-educated.

Many are born to prosperous families and take a rational decision about the path they choose. "What this amounts to is in many ways more alarming than the ubiquitous misperception of the suicide bomber as fanatical," *New Scientist* says in tomorrow's issue. "It means that in the right circumstances, anyone could be one."

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

More than half the suicide bombers had undertaken further education, compared with just 15 per cent of the general population.

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A study into Hezbollah militants who died in action in Lebanon in the 1980s and 1990s showed they were less likely to have come from poor families and likelier to have attended secondary school than others of their age.

And the idea that suicide bombers are simply suicidal is discounted by Israeli psychologist Ariel Merari from Tel Aviv University. He studied the backgrounds of every suicide bomber in the Middle East since 1983, when the modern era of suicide attacks began with a truck bombing at the US embassy in Beirut that killed 63 people.

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

Eyad El-Sarraj, chairman of the Gaza Community Mental Health Program, 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 Israeli soldiers.

Whatever the individual trigger, suicide bombers are invariably channelled by disciplined, well-organised groups into taking the path of self-destruction in the fight against the enemy, the report says.

The groups, the result of a "peculiar mix of social, cultural and political ingredients", forge and promote the cult of the suicide bombers, glorifying their acts within the community and often indoctrinating candidates with promises of divine reward.

The "brotherhood mentality" is typically reinforced at the crucial moment by a farewell testimony in a letter or video - a classic manoeuvre to force the suicide attacker beyond the point of no return.

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