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New study offers insight on Palestinian suicide attacks

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REPORTING FROM JERUSALEM -- A strong correlation exists between unemployment, tough economic conditions and the nature of suicide attacks carried out by Palestinians in recent years, according to a new study, the first comprehensive research of its kind.

The study, conducted by the [Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace](#), found that while poverty itself did not necessarily dictate the frequency of terrorist attacks, economic conditions were closely linked to the characteristics of the perpetrators and, more interestingly, the nature of the suicide operations themselves.

The study analyzed the personal, educational and economic backgrounds of 157 Palestinians who carried out suicide attacks between 2000 and 2006, including those whose operations failed. It is hoped that the analysis can help authorities consider economic improvement as an effective counter-terrorism method, as opposed to only traditional security measures and crackdowns, the study's authors said.

Unemployment won't automatically produce suicide attackers, but it does have an impact on the kind of people willing to undertake them, the study found, and this in turn influences the nature of the attacks, their impact and consequences.

A 5 percentage point increase in the unemployment rate was shown to increase the probability that the attacker would have some academic background and would previously have been involved in some kind of militant activity. The higher jobless rate was also likely to increase the chance that the attacker would target a city with a population of more than 50,000, according to the research.

In other words, the higher the unemployment rate, the more mature, educated and experienced the people who join the potential reservoir of would-be suicide attackers, the study found. And this allows recruiters to be more choosy, handpicking only the most suitable candidates.

"Terror organizations clearly respond to their economic environment," said Esteban Klor, a senior lecturer at Hebrew University, who co-authored the study with fellow Hebrew University senior lecturer Claude Berrebi and Efraim Benmelech of Harvard University.

Klor explained that when the pool of candidates grows, recruiters choose those with the best chances of carrying out the mission. For example, a more mature and educated Palestinian man is more likely to succeed in crossing checkpoints into Israel and reaching a prime destination compared with a teenager with poor Hebrew-language skills, who could arouse more suspicion.

"Organizers will save quality recruits for quality attacks," such as mass-casualty operations at prime, crowded locations in major Israeli cities, Klor said. Less-educated, inexperienced or younger recruits would more typically be used to carry out less-complex, smaller attacks in the West Bank, where densely populated targets are fewer and the casualty count would be lower.

According to the research, the unemployment rate in the Palestinian territories reached 60% among the general population and 37% among men ages 18 to 40 during the six-year period analyzed. And almost all the attackers were males between the ages of 15 and 40, the study found.

A small percentage of women have been involved in suicide attacks, but their numbers were too small for meaningful analysis or for determining additional factors in their cases, Klor said.

The study has been given to the Israeli prime minister's office, the defense minister and the heads of the security branches.

The authors said the research could have important implications for counter-terrorism policies, and Klor said it could also help to encourage economic

cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians.

The complete study is expected to be released in coming days.

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-- Batsheva Sobelman

Photo: Israeli policemen survey the scene after a Palestinian suicide bomber blew himself up in the city of Beersheba in August 2005. Credit: Nir Elias / Reuters

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