

Eyad Sarraj

Why We Blow Ourselves Up

A Palestinian doctor explains why so many of his people want to be martyrs

A FEW WEEKS AGO, MY SISTER, A PROFESSIONAL AND A mother of four, was visibly shaken as she watched, on television, Israeli tanks torturing the streets of a refugee camp and soldiers raping its homes. She shocked us all when she declared that she would like to become a martyr. A few hours later, a young Palestinian woman stunned the world when she turned herself into a human bomb and exploded in Jerusalem, killing one Israeli and wounding 150 others. In the weeks after, more women joined the queue of suicide bombers as the world stood alarmed and bewildered.

To understand why Palestinian men, and now women, are blowing themselves up in Israeli restaurants and buses is to understand the Arab-Israeli conflict. Ours is a nation of anger and defiance. The struggle today is how not to become a suicide bomber. We are told that there are long queues of people willing to join the road to heaven, and I believe it.

What propels people into such action is a long history of humiliation and a desire for revenge that every Arab harbors. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the resultant uprooting of Palestinians, a deep-seated feeling of shame has taken root in the Arab psyche. Shame is the most painful emotion in the Arab culture, producing the feeling that one is unworthy to live. The honorable Arab is the one who refuses to suffer shame and dies in dignity.

The 35 years of Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has served as a continuous reminder of Arab weakness. But it was the destruction of the P.L.O. in Lebanon by Ariel Sharon that decisively shifted the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation to the occupied territories and Israel. Helplessness and shame gave way to anger that later poured into the streets as defiance. That was the first *intifadeh*.

Suddenly Palestinians felt that they were restoring their honor by fighting the aggressor, by not being helpless victims. Facing a superior Israeli army with its formidable arsenal, they felt morally victorious as the children of the stones became heroes of defiance. While that sense of victory served

Arafat as a psychological platform to launch his peace initiative and recognition of Israel, it was the Oslo agreement and the peace process that followed that disillusioned the Palestinians and threw them into a new episode of confrontation. The reluctance of Israeli governments to implement promised withdrawals from Palestinian land, and then the catastrophic failure of the Camp David talks, prepared the fertile soil for a new breed of militants and suicide bombers.

It was the re-entry of Sharon to the political scene that

sparked the new *intifadeh*. Scores of Palestinians were killed and maimed as Sharon declared his intention to cause as many casualties as possible. This time around, however, Israeli soldiers were not on foot and not even visible as they shot from their tanks. Palestinian militants shifted their target to the exposed Israeli civilians in markets and cafés. For the extremist militant, there is no difference between Israelis. They are the enemy; they are all the same.

In every case of martyrdom, there is a personal story of tragedy and trauma. A curious journalist once asked me to introduce him to a potential martyr. When the journalist asked, "Why would you do it?" he was told, "Would you fight for your country or not? Of course you would. You would be respected in your country as a brave man, and I would be remembered as a martyr."

This is the influence of the teaching of the Koran, the most potent and powerful book in Arabia for the past 14 centuries. In the holy book, God promised Muslims who sacrificed themselves for the sake of Islam that they would not die. They would live on in paradise. Muslims, men and women, even secularists, hold to the

promise literally. Heaven is then the ultimate reward of the devout who have the courage to take the ultimate test of faith.

What the young man did not say was that he was burning with a desire for revenge. He was a tearful witness, at the age of six, to his father's beating by Israeli soldiers. He would never forget seeing his father taken away, bleeding from the nose.

As Sharon was taking Arafat hostage and grinding the salt of humiliation into the sour wounds, he was taking us into a new horrific level of madness. Another Palestinian girl blew herself up in Jerusalem last week, killing two Israelis and wounding more. She will not be the last. ■



AYAT AKHRAS was only 16 when she set off explosives outside a supermarket last week

Dr. Eyad Sarraj is a psychiatrist and founder of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights