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The mind of a suicide bomber A politically incorrect film explores the bomb bearers' many motivations

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A feature film about Palestinian suicide bombers called "Paradise Now" caused an outcry earlier this year among Israelis. They said it was too sympathetic toward its main characters, who are depicted as being motivated by anger at Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

[\[Podcast: Jonathan Curiel with 'Suicide Killers' director Pierre Rehov. \]](#)

A new documentary, "Suicide Killers," by French-Jewish filmmaker Pierre Rehov is sure to draw barbs from the other camp. Rehov interviews Palestinians imprisoned for trying to detonate suicide bombs and concludes they're influenced by a religious culture that represses sexual desires and channels the resulting frustration into homicidal rage.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which nominated "Paradise Now" (directed by a Palestinian) for a 2006 best foreign-language film Academy Award, is considering "Suicide Killers" as a 2007 nominee for Best Documentary. The film, which has already screened in New York, will be shown in San Francisco if Academy judges select it as a finalist in the documentary category.

The question of what motivates some Palestinians to strap on explosives and try to kill Israeli citizens has been debated intensively in the past five years, while a string of attacks has resulted in the deaths of 1,000 Israelis.

Some Palestinians say the bombers are fueled by revenge and hopelessness brought on by decades of Israeli occupation, which have choked off the economic and social life of the Palestinian territories, and by Israeli military actions that have killed and wounded thousands of Palestinians. Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi told the BBC in 2002 that suicide bombers are "driven to desperation and anger by the Israeli activities."

Journalist and United Nations official Nasra Hassan, who has done extensive interviews with Palestinian suicide bombers, found that one of their prime goals was to spread fear in the hearts of Israelis. Hamas members told her that suicide bombings were a legitimate tactic against Israeli aggression. Studies by Israeli researchers have found that Palestinian suicide bombers are motivated by many factors, including religion and a desire to avenge the deaths of other Palestinians.

But filmmaker Rehov reaches different conclusions. Several of the young men whom he interviews behind bars say they are eager to reach paradise and the 72 virgins promised by Islamic theology.

"Those who blow themselves up get a good bonus from God - they marry 72 virgins," one tells Rehov. (A Hamas cleric told Hassan that the 72 virgins aren't on hand for sexual gratification, however.) One jailed woman talks about wanting to be the "prettiest" among the heavenly virgins.

"Suicide Killers," Rehov says, is "not politically correct." It minimizes the role that Israel's territorial occupation has on Palestinian anger and emphasizes the sexual repression that Rehov says contributes to the bombers' actions. Still, Bassem Eid, a Palestinian-Muslim journalist and human-rights activist in East Jerusalem, praises the movie for exploring the motivations of suicide bombers, saying in a phone interview, "I think suicide bombing is one of the most severe human rights violations."

Rehov has made five previous nonfiction films about Palestinians or the Palestinian territories, including "Holy Land: Christians in Peril." The Chronicle interviewed Rehov by phone from his home in Paris. Here are excerpts:

Q: Why did you make this film?

A: I had originally wanted to make a film about the psychology of (Israeli) victims of suicide attacks. I started interviewing victims, but I realized it was going to be a film (of a story that had been told before) — that the victims' lives were completely torn apart. But something struck me: Everyone told me about the last second before the suicide bomber blew himself up - the look and the smile on his face. I was intrigued about how someone can do something so extreme and have a nice smile on his face. I wanted to discover on the individual level what was hiding behind the smile. This is when I shifted.

In the midst of all this, I talked to one of the girls who survived an attack in Haifa. She was a waitress. She was 17. She saw the taxi stop by the cafe where she was working, she saw a guy come in, going straight to her, and opening his shirt and showing dynamite around his belt. He pointed with his finger toward the dynamite and said, to her, "Do you know what this is?"

I've studied psychology, and there are a lot of things connected to flashers - they want to destroy innocence. I realized that these guys in the last minute of their lives have this same behavior. This is when I understood there is something really sexual about this extreme act they want to commit. I knew (about the Islamic religious belief) of 72 virgins, and I also knew about how sexual frustration can lead to people becoming serial killers.

Q: You interview Palestinians in Israeli jails who tried to detonate suicide bombs or who abetted would-be attacks. Only one of them seems to regret what he tried to do. Did this surprise you?

A: Every single one of them tried to convince me it was the right thing to do for moralistic reasons. These aren't kids who want to do evil. These are kids who want to do good. If they'd been raised in a different world, with different moral values, they would have been just great kids. This is what struck me the most: The result of this brainwashing was kids who were very good people deep inside (were) believing so much that they were doing something great.

Every one of them said that all our behaviors on Earth are impure, and they were trying to reach purity. They said they were "invaded" by Israeli culture. When they turn on the television, they see half-naked dancers. They were offended by that. They wanted me to understand that all this was forbidden on Earth, but if you did something great for God — like blowing yourself up and killing a bunch of innocent Israelis because they are Jews and don't believe the same thing you believe -you end up being forgiven for all of your sins and will go to heaven and find 72 virgins waiting for you.

revenge and helplessness? An Israeli study of Palestinian suicide bombers from 2003 says religious fanaticism is just one of many factors.

A: It's obviously much more complicated than just to say, "They do it because the next minute they wake up in heaven and 72 virgins take care of them." But my theory applies to Palestinians as well as al Qaeda terrorists, who were in strip clubs the night before they blew up the World Trade Center. It can also apply to a kid from London who's in a very religious family but yet lives in a city where everything is possible and open to him.

The (Israeli) occupation is, of course, part of the problem; without the occupation, they wouldn't have to deal with the Israeli culture and wouldn't have to deal with the Israeli presence and wouldn't have the sensation of being unpowerful, and it's very much also connected to pride - and pride is connected to sexuality. It's part of your self. It's part of your behavior as a male or a female. You want to prove to the world that your genes are better than other genes, and these genes should be transmitted. All of this is connected. To just say that on the material level that occupation is painful is completely inaccurate.

I travel a lot in Arab countries. Palestinians live much better, even under occupation, than most Arabs do. If you want to talk about real misery in the Muslim world, go to Libya, or go even to the suburbs of Cairo — then you'll see real misery.

Palestinians in the streets of Jenin are complaining about occupation, but they are complaining about it on a cell phone. (Also) the ones who blow themselves up, when they talk about occupation, Tel Aviv is occupation. My film is not a scientific study. I wanted to make a film showing suicide bombers from the inside. I preferred to follow my instinct.

Q: Did the prisoners you interviewed know you were Jewish, and did this have any affect on the way they responded to your questions?

A: They kind of knew, but for them, I was French before anything else. For them, an American Jew is like an Israeli, and a French Jew is still French, and an Israeli Jew is pure evil. Being French for them meant that I was a friend. (My religion) wasn't important for them.

You'd be surprised - my crew was entirely Israeli except for the translator, who was Israeli Arab. When they were talking to me, they were talking to a French person through an Israeli Arab who was a brother to them. They didn't care or consider about the presence of an Israeli crew, mainly Jews, with a camera filming them.

They looked straight into the camera and said, "Well, we want the Jews to disappear." (But after the filming,) I kept in touch with some of the guys. They gave me phone numbers of their families. (The imprisoned Palestinians) said, "Please, if you go back to my village, talk to my uncle." I'm thinking about making another film about the same subject, maybe go back to one of the jails, now that I know them well.

Q: Bassem Eid praises your film, but I'm sure many Palestinians will say the contentions in "Suicide Killers" are those of a Western, Jewish journalist with a narrow view about Islamic culture and Palestinian motivations.

A: If you look at the film, I didn't come up with just Occidental analysts going to a blackboard and saying, "Hey, this is how it works." I came up with people from inside the Palestinian territories. Every single one of my suicide bombers talks about it; a woman talks about wanting to be one of the 72 virgins, saying, "I would have been the prettiest of all." If you talk to students in Gaza, they talk

Q: Until you were 9, you were raised in Algeria. Why have you said that Muslim culture is in crisis?

A: To make it simple, I witnessed the culture for many, many years. I used to go on vacation in Morocco and Tunisia. Lately, I went back to Algeria for the first time in 40 years. I was born in this culture. I was used to being surrounded by Arabs and by Muslims. I feel very comfortable when I'm with them. I have no problem at all. It's a very warm civilization where solidarity is at a very high level. There's a lot of good aspects about Islam.

Unfortunately, what is going on right now is that Islam itself was not capable of going to the 21st century. Islam didn't have its enlightenment, didn't (lead to) new technologies, didn't participate in the modern world. I'm not saying the modern world is good or bad. Islam didn't participate in the modern world for many reasons, one of them being the level of corruption of the (political) leaders in Islam. In order to stay in place, they promoted for decades this theory that the West, especially Israel, is responsible for all the misery of their people.

I don't recognize the Islam of my childhood. I don't recognize the Islam of my vacations 25 years ago to south Morocco, where there is a lot of poverty and where people consider Islam as a very generous and nonviolent religion.

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