

# **81 | discursive and political deployments by/of the 2002 Palestinian women suicide bombers/martyrs**

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## **abstract**

This paper focuses on representations by and deployments of the four Palestinian women who during the first four months of 2002 killed themselves in organized attacks against Israeli military personnel or civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories or Israel. The paper addresses the manner in which these militant women produced and situated themselves as gendered-political subjects, and argues that their self-representations and acts were deployed by individuals and groups in the region to reflect and articulate other gendered-political subjectivities that at times undermined or rearticulated patriarchal religio-nationalist understandings of gender and women in relation to corporeality, authenticity, and community. The data analysed include photographs, narrative representations in television and newspaper media, the messages the women left behind, and secondary sources.

## **keywords**

Palestine; women; suicide bombers; martyrdom; masculinity; Al-Aqsa intifada

## introduction

Political violence often destabilizes existing social realities and discourses even as it produces new ones (Apter, 1997: 8). This is particularly so with suicide/martyrdom attacks, given their drama and the spectacular extent to which they communicate the actor's willingness to put her/his body on the line in the service of a political cause. This was the case with the four Palestinian women – Wafa Idris, Dareen Abu 'Aisheh, Ayat Akhras, and Andaleeb Takatkeh – who in the first four months of 2002 killed themselves in organized attacks against Israeli military personnel or civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories or Israel (within its June 4, 1967 borders).<sup>1</sup> I describe these women militants as both 'suicide bombers' and 'martyrs' to epistemologically acknowledge the multiple ways in which their acts were understood and experienced.

Violent acts in the service of expressing a political 'truth' are often plurally interpreted (Apter, 1997: 12 and 16) by differently located individuals and groups. This article addresses the manner in which the four women produced and situated themselves as gendered-political subjects, and how their self-representations, images, and acts were deployed by individuals and groups in the region. Crucial to the political and discursive significance of the suicide bombers/martyrs was that these were the bodies and blood of women, dramatically made relevant in ways that challenged the sexual and feminized forms usually associated with menstruation, childbirth, heteronormativity, maternal sacrifice, and the violated or raped woman.<sup>2</sup> In addition to defying their own placement within this normative gender-sexual grid with various levels of explicitness, the women militants communicated a dramatic objection to Israeli military occupation of Palestinian land and repression of the Palestinian population. They also challenged Israeli gendered assumptions that it is Palestinian male and not female bodies that militarily threatened their racialized social order. Moreover, they concurrently called men to arms in defense of community, and participated in that defense themselves, destabilizing the construct of men as defenders of community and women as the protected. The deployments that emerged in the Arabic-speaking world in response to these women's acts highlighted or silenced some of their originary messages to various degrees, and produced new (albeit often predictable) narratives saturated with gendered and sexualized signifiers that shed light on socio-political life, as well as the locations and ideologies of the narrators.

## methodology

This article analyses the narratives of political leaders, activists, reporters, pundits, the women bombers themselves, and other groups in the Arab world in relation to these violent acts. The data analysed comes from Arabic satellite

**1** Idris was a 28-year-old divorcee who had dropped out of high school to marry; she lived with her widowed mother in Ramallah's al-Am'ari refugee camp. Abu 'Aisheh was 21 years old, lived with her family in the Nablus village of Beit Wazan, and was a student at Najah University (Daraghme, 2002; Farrell, 2002; Hammer, 2002). Akhras was an 18-year-old high school senior who lived in the Deheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem with her parents and siblings; her father worked as a construction foreman with an Israeli firm building in the nearby Jewish settlement of Beitar Illit (Hammer, 2002; Rubin, 2002). Takatkeh, who was variously reported to be 18- or 20 years old, had dropped out of high school and was a seamstress at a Palestinian textile factory; she lived with her impoverished family in the southern West Bank village of Beit Fajar (Al-Batsh, 2002; Hendawi, 2002; Lamb, 2002a). Three additional Palestinian women undertook suicide/martyrdom attacks through July 2004.

While I recognize the fear that these violent acts have produced for Jewish Israelis, this article is not about the women's victims, or the value and morality of suicide as a method of militance (see Hage, 2003).

**2** The following sources discuss the politics and operations of some of these gendered embodiment issues in Palestinian nationalist discourses and practices: Kanaaneh (2002), especially pp. 56–73 and 104–166; Katz (2003), especially pp. 95–105; Peteet (1991), especially pp. 175–203; and Sharoni (1995), especially pp. 34–36, 38–39, 48.

**3** See Yiftachel (1998) and Yiftachel and Meir (1998) for discussion of similar ethno-racial state operations within 1967-bordered Israel.

television news programmes, especially the Al-Jazeera channel, Arabic- and English-language newspapers, and material gathered from wide-ranging on-line searches for images, official source documents, interviews, articles, and poetry. The impetus for this article came in late March 2002, when I watched an average of 8 hours per day of satellite television as I followed the Israeli re-occupation and devastation of the 'autonomous' areas of the West Bank. Ayat Akhras, the third woman bomber, undertook her attack on 29 March. I noticed different deployments of masculinity in the televised responses to her act, leading me to the more systematic research that became the basis of this article.

## **geographies of domination**

Bodies move through places and spaces that are never neutral of privileges or exclusions based on gender, race-ethnicity, religion, class, (dis)ability, and sexuality (Minow, 1990; Walkowitz, 1992; Barkley Brown, 1995; Frader and Rose, 1996: 14; Elder, 1998; Nast and Pile, 1998). That is, it is important to recognize 'the spatial technologies of domination' (Pile, 1997: 3) that are implied in words such as 'line', 'border', and 'occupation'. For Palestinians outside historic Palestine, especially refugees, such a spatial understanding of their subordination and disenfranchisement is embedded in the realities of diasporic existence. For Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, their spatial-racial subordination expresses itself through a variety of mechanisms: Israeli checkpoints, special roads for Jews that avoid Palestinian villages and towns, segregated marketplaces and restaurants, Jewish settlements, Palestinian refugee camps, special identification cards, colour-coded license plates, East in relation to West Jerusalem, the Palestinian city of Nablus in relation to the Jewish settlement of Itamar, and most recently, the apartheid wall that has further segmented the West Bank and occupied Jerusalem. These places, barriers, and identifying markers make conspicuous the racialized geography of separation, hierarchy, containment, and control of Palestinian bodies that undergirds Israeli politics and planning.<sup>3</sup>

Where the four women chose to commit their violence illustrates the existence and their awareness of this racialized geography. Idris did so outside a shoe store on Jaffa Street in largely Jewish West Jerusalem (Florio, 2002); Abu 'Aisheh was being asked to produce identity documents at an Israeli checkpoint near the Jewish settlement of Maccabim and the West Bank border with Israel (Daraghme, 2002; Farrell, 2002; Williams, 2002b); Akhras was being questioned by an Israeli security guard at the entrance of a supermarket in the Jewish neighbourhood of Kiryat Yovel in West Jerusalem (Rubin, 2002); and Takatkeh was at the Mahane Yehuda market standing in front of a No. 6 bus on Jaffa Street that was heading to the Jewish neighbourhood of Talpiot (Lamb, 2002a, b; Lefkovits, 2002).

The Palestinians who undertake these attacks can only commit them by violating such geographic organization through ideological, sartorial, and racialized forms

of 'passing', so that they are deemed unsuspecting enough to enter Jewish-majority places. The average Jewish Israeli's task at the borders of such places – like that of the Israeli security guard, soldier, or police officer – is to determine before it is too late who in his/her midst might be planning such an attack.<sup>4</sup> This racialized geography is often informed by gender and sexuality, as indicated by a December 2000 Israeli military order predating women's involvement in such attacks that banned all Palestinian men from travelling in private vehicles on West Bank roads unless a woman was in the car (Johnson and Kuttab, 2001: 22). As Begoña Aretxaga argued with respect to Irish women republicans, men often under-endow women with violent or political intent (Aretxaga, 1997: 38–39 and 66–68).

Palestinian women planning such attacks have to decide what is the most effective way to enter Jewish-majority social spaces in Israel and the Occupied Territories. In order for this to occur, they must appear unthreatening to Jewish bodies. For example, the family of Heba Daraghme, the fifth Palestinian woman bomber, reported that while she usually wore a facial veil and covered 'herself from head to toe in a dark brown, all-enveloping robe at all times', she was dressed in a jean outfit at the bombing scene (Ghazali, 2003). As was the case with Algerian women militants in the war against the French colonizers (Pile, 1997: 17–23; Lazreg, 1994: 121 and 122), the Palestinian women's efficacy ironically depends on their political-racial-sexual invisibility.

**4** In May 2003 Israeli Cabinet Minister Gideon Ezra suggested that only Arabs be used as security guards in Israel because they have 'the sense of smell needed to smell other Arabs, more so than immigrants from the former Soviet Union' (Levy, 2003).

## **the Aqsa intifada and suicide/martyrdom attacks**

By September 2000, numerous negotiations between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority (PA) since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 had failed over Israeli refusal to dismantle Jewish settlements, address the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and resolve the status of East Jerusalem. Palestinian frustration with the Oslo process was also related to the fact that in the seven years that followed the signing of accords, Israeli land confiscation and Jewish settlement in the Occupied Territories intensified and the PA was marked by corrupt, undemocratic, and repressive practices.

The Aqsa uprising erupted on 28 September, 2000, following Likud party Knesset member Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Aqsa mosque compound/al-Haram al-Sharif in the old city of Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> Until January 2001, resistance was largely limited to stone-throwing male Palestinian demonstrators confronting Israeli personnel at checkpoints (Johnson and Kuttab, 2001: 21). Armed attacks by Palestinians became more common following the December 2000 military order by the Israeli Chief of Staff allowing the 'use of attack helicopters and tank fire against a largely unarmed population...' (Johnson and Kuttab, 2001: 22).

**5** This visit was intended to 'steal the thunder' from Sharon's opponent, former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose political comeback was facilitated when

his bribery and corruption case was thrown out by the Israeli attorney general. On 28 September, Sharon and a delegation of Likud Knesset members entered the Haram al-Sharif area under heavy military escort and were barred from entering the Marwani Mosque by a sit-in of 200 Palestinians, including Arab members of the Knesset. After the Likud delegation left, Palestinians threw stones at about 1,000 riot police, who responded with rubber bullets and tear gas. On 29 September, Israeli police and sharpshooters killed four and injured about 220 Palestinians in the compound (Kjorlien, 2001: 128, 129). In the first 10 days of October, 13 Palestinians in Israel were also killed by Israeli police forces or civilians, most while demonstrating in solidarity with Palestinians in the Occupied Territories (Ittjiah, 2004).

**6** The military wing of the secular-Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), named the Abu 'Ali Mustafa Brigades after the PFLP General Secretary assassinated by Israeli forces in Ramallah on 27 August, 2001, also for the first time undertook at least two suicide/martyrdom attacks that killed six people in February and May 2002, although party leaders and members were

The first suicide/martyrdom attack against Israelis by a Palestinian from the territories was undertaken by a young Gaza man against soldiers at a Tel Aviv army bus station in April 1994. A total of 14 suicide attacks killing civilians occurred through September 2000. In a striking increase, 27 Palestinian suicide attacks resulting in the death of civilians occurred in the 20 months that followed (Amnesty International, 2002: 3 and 4). Palestinian attackers have targeted civilians (at indoor and outdoor markets, restaurants, buses, bus stops, hotels) in pre-1967 Israel, Israeli soldiers and police forces (on buses, at checkpoints), and Jewish settlers of all ages in the Occupied Territories.

The Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, established soon after Sharon's visit to the Aqsa compound, are very loosely affiliated with the Fatah movement and often exist in contentious relations with its late leader Yasser Arafat (Lynfield, 2002a; Williams, 2002a). Until the 14 January, 2002 Israeli assassination of brigades leader Raed Karmi, all Palestinian suicide/martyrdom attacks were committed by men active in the militias of Hamas (acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement) and Islamic Jihad. In addition, the Aqsa brigades had not undertaken any violent attacks in pre-1967 bordered Israel and their attacks against Israeli settlers and soldiers in the territories were largely drive-by shootings rather than being suicidal (Lynfield, 2002a). The four women focused on in this article were prepared for their attacks by the Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, although only one of them, Wafa Idris, was a committed Fatah activist. Following her attack, the brigades formed a martyrdom cell for Palestinian women called the 'Wafa Idris Group' (Awadat, 2002; Claudet, 2002).<sup>6</sup>

Muslim and Christian Palestinians often use the term 'martyrdom' rather than 'suicide' operations to describe these attacks because the former indicate 'respect and honor for the bomber' and the family left behind, while suicide is forbidden by Islam (Allen, 2002: 36). According to Ramallah religious leader Sheikh Bassam Jarrar, 'Suicide is running away, it is weakness and fear of facing life and its troubles. But martyrdom operations...[are] known throughout history and... respected by all nations. People who carry out such attacks are those who are very brave, braver than others' (Allen, 2002: 36). Abu Wadya, an Aqsa Martyrs Brigade commander from the Deheishe refugee camp, framed the method even more pragmatically, 'The suicide martyr serves a certain goal at a certain place and time.... Our capabilities can't be compared to Israel's. So we adopt a variety of methods to give us leverage' (Williams, 2002a). Jarrar's references to 'history' and 'all nations' demonstrate the manner in which sacred, strategic, and secular considerations are often intertwined in the explanation and rationale for such attacks.<sup>7</sup> He also described suicide and martyrdom in oppositional gendered terms – cowardice, weakness, and fear versus bravery – indicating the destabilizing possibilities for hegemonic masculinities and femininities when such acts are undertaken by women.

## women's political violence and agency

The available evidence suggests that the Palestinian women bombers/martyrs viewed themselves as legitimate militant actors. The first attacker, Wafa Idris, was a longtime political activist in Fatah and had told family and friends a number of times that she 'wanted to sacrifice herself for her country' (Contenta, 2002; Miller, 2002), but left no evidence about her intent, leading some to speculate that she was intending to plant a bomb and leave (AFP, 2002; Beaumont, 2002; DPA, 2002; Hockstader, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Lavie, 2002; Lynfield, 2002b; Miller, 2002). Dareen Abu 'Aisheh was also a political activist, but with the Hamas organization (Williams, 2002b). She turned to the Fatah-affiliated Aqsa Martyrs Brigades when Hamas' military wing, the Martyr 'Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades, and the Islamic Jihad organization, refused to prepare her for the attack because she was a woman (Daraghme, 2002; Farrell, 2002; Williams, 2002a,b). The third woman, Ayat Akhras, was not a known member of any political movement, although she wore the black-and-white checkered headscarf that represents Fatah in the video she left behind; she was also reported by family members to have followed the news on Arabic satellite stations closely and to be 'fiercely opinionated' (Hammer, 2002). Andaleeb Takatkeh, the fourth bomber, was described by her parents as an 'ordinary' quiet teenager who 'never seemed political', but often 'sat transfixed watching TV news reports of the military campaign Israel launched in late March...' (Lamb, 2002a). According to an Israeli government advisory, a 21-year-old Palestinian man from Hebron arrested on April 25 'confessed' that Takatkeh was registered with the Aqsa Brigades in Bethlehem and had communicated that she was 'ready to perpetrate a suicide attack' against Israeli Defence Forces (Media Advisory, 2002).

The Palestinian women's attacks certainly undermine what Cynthia Enloe has called a 'gendered culture of danger' whereby manliness is defined by the unwillingness to shy away from danger and womanliness is that which is 'vulnerable to danger' and requiring protection (Enloe, 1993: 15). When girls and women abide by scripts of heteronormativity, chastity, and sexual-racial boundary maintenance, nationalist (and religio-political) discourses often construct them 'as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour', who embody the nation that men and boys 'live and die for' (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 45 and 47). Women engaging in high-risk or suicidal militance on behalf of community can destabilize the sexual-gender logic of such frameworks, as well as challenge the gendered link between military risk-taking and national membership and status (Benton, 1998: 40-43). In a highly militarized and expansionist state like Israel, for example, there is a direct connection between 'citizen' and 'warrior' (Bryson, 1998: 140 and 141), and combat roles in particular place Israelis on the fastest professional and political 'track' (Kaplan, 2000).<sup>8</sup>

reportedly divided over such attacks as a strategy (Amnesty International, 2002: 14 and 15).

**7** It is difficult to make claims even about a singular religious originary source for martyrdom (Boyarin, 1999: 93 and 109).

**8** Men continue to hold 99 per cent of 'active combat positions' in the

Israeli Defense Forces, despite legal challenges that have opened such positions to women (Budeiri, 1998; Jewish Bulletin of Northern California, 2001; Frucht, 2003; Schechter, 2004).

**9** Two of the most famous Palestinian women militants who died in battle are Fatima Ghazzal and Shadiya Abu Ghazaleh. Layla Khaled of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine achieved world renown when she hijacked two airplanes in 1969 and 1970.

**10** Although the video grab is not fully legible, at the bottom of the mosque drawing, the following appears to be written, 'The martyr [masc.] wrote'.... [*kataba al-shaheed*....]. And the banner she wears across her chest appears to read, 'pioneers of unity brigades...'. [*saraya talaai' al-wihda*....].

Similarly, the heroes of Palestinian history and its political leaders are usually fighters or former fighters, and the list is dominated by men, although it includes a number of women.<sup>9</sup> In the 1987–1991 Palestinian uprising and the more recent Al-Aqsa intifada, 'martyr' and the heroics and sacrifice associated with death resulting from resistance to the Israeli occupation-evoked images of boys or men, not girls and women. Moreover, physical violence was not important to constructions of Palestinian femininity, did not 'reproduce or affirm aspects of female identity,' and did not 'constitute a rite of passage into adult female status,' the roles it often came to play for young men who had been imprisoned, tortured, and beaten during the earlier uprising (Peteet, 2000: 118 and 119). The typical response of families to high-risk activism by Palestinian girls and women has been to restrict their movement and political activity.

## gendered deployments

This section explores the most prominent gender themes in Palestinian and Arab responses to the women bombers. The post-mortem deployments of their acts, bodies, lives, and intentions were multiple and unstable, and often depended on the socio-political-ideological locations of the interpreters. A number of these discursive deployments – those that constructed the women as militant political agents rather than caretakers and sufferers, used the attacks to challenge the masculinity of Arab men, and represented the acts as truer than mere statements of support for Palestinian suffering – were mobilized by the women in the explanations they left behind.

The three women bombers who left a message represented their acts as explosive and embodied *action*, recognizing that it was more dramatic and dangerous because they are women. For example, Arabic satellite television stations showed excerpts of video testimony in which Andaleeb Takatkeh, wearing a white headscarf and a black-and-white checkered kuffiyeh over her shoulders, with a drawing of the Al-Aqsa Mosque behind her (See figure 1), read from a statement: 'I've chosen to say with my body what Arab leaders have failed to say.... My body is a barrel of gunpowder that burns the enemy' (Hendawi, 2002).<sup>10</sup> Not trivial in this regard is that major agreements and high-level meetings are almost always limited to Arab or Israeli men negotiating with and making commitments to each other, putatively on behalf of their communities (Sharoni, 1995: 14–21 and 23). Ayat Akhras used a narrative in her videotape that harkened at least as far back as the 1930s, when Palestinian women instigated men to rebellion against the British mandate authorities (Fleischmann, 2003: 125 and 126). She called on Arab men leaders to fulfil their masculine duties of protecting and defending the community and its women: 'I say to the Arab leaders, Stop sleeping. Stop failing to fulfill your duty. Shame on the Arab armies who are sitting and watching the girls of Palestine fighting while they are asleep. It is intifada until victory' (Hammer, 2002; Hazboun,



I thank Khalid Medani and his brother for helping decipher these words.

**Figure 1** Andaleeb Takatkeh looking up from reading a statement in this frame grab from an amateur video distributed on 13 April, 2002 by an Aqsa Martyrs brigade in Beit Fajjar. Takatkeh said in the video that she was a 'living martyr' who had decided to sacrifice herself for her people (Reuters).

2002; Rubin, 2002).<sup>11</sup> Both women contrasted their attacks to the perceived weakness and silence of Arab men leaders and castigated them for failing their duties. All the women who left a message claimed and demonstrated their right to sacrifice themselves, concurrently deploying and challenging gendered—sexualized norms of duty and responsibility with respect to who protects the community and who is protected within it.

The women's narratives gain much of their significance against a cultural terrain that assumes Arab men should act in decisive ways when the (Arab or Muslim) community (*umma*) is under attack. As discussed below, however, many Arab women and girls interpreted and responded to the attacks as calls for *women's* militant political action in defense of community. Indeed, Abu 'Aisheh explained her own act in this manner. After all, Palestinian *men* continue to comprise the vast majority of casualties, militant activists and prisoners, making it difficult to assume that Palestinian women undertake such attacks merely to shame indifferent Palestinian men into action. Other narratives re-scripted the women's lives and acts in ways that could still be configured within a framework of women as embodying and representing national identity and honour, and men as the primary subjects and agents within the national, pan-Arab, and/or Arab Muslim community.

**11** This statement speaks to the widespread resonance of pan-Arab and/or pan-Muslim definitions of community that construct the Palestinian problem as not merely the Palestinians' problem, but one that requires a regional Arab response.

### religio-political discourses on women's martyrdom

The main Islamist organizations operating in the Occupied Territories, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, did not sponsor any of these women's suicide/martyrdom attacks,



although some of their women activists made statements in support of the women. Regional responses by men Muslim leaders and Islamists to the women's attacks and their 'martyrdom' status varied.

**12** The wheel-chair bound Yassin was assassinated by rockets fired from Israeli Air Force helicopter gunships as he was leaving a Gaza City mosque on 21 March, 2004.

Following Idris's attack on 27 January, the late Shaykh Ahmad Yassin,<sup>12</sup> founder of Hamas, stated that 'The woman has a uniqueness that makes her different from man. Islam gives her some rules. If she goes out to jihad and fight, then she must be accompanied by a *mahram*' (a male relative she is forbidden by consanguinity to marry) if she will be absent from home for more than a day and a night. He reiterated an earlier statement that women were not needed for martyrdom operations since Hamas was unable to 'absorb the growing number of applications from [*shabab*] male youths' who wanted to undertake them. Yassin asserted that women should be at home and evoked their bodies as primarily maternal, sheltering, grieving, and suffering: 'The woman is the second defense line in the resistance to the occupation. She shelters the fugitive, loses the son, husband, and brother, bears the consequences of this, and faces starvation and blockade' (Isa, 2002). At 2 weeks after Idris's attack, Shaykh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, was asked by a reporter from the London-based Arabic-language *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper if unaccompanied women bombers were disobedient and thus their operations not martyrdom. His response contradicted Yassin's position on accompaniment: 'If a woman leaves her house for jihad and in order to uphold right and justice, then she is not a disobedient woman. If she is killed she will be considered a martyr, winning God's acceptance, even if she left without a *mahram*' (Al-Husayni, 2002).

Dareen Abu 'Aisheh, a devout Muslim and Hamas activist, also challenged Yassin's position in the videotaped message that she left behind to explain her 27 February attack by saying that she was following Wafa Idris's path to martyrdom and insisting that women's roles 'will not only be confined to weeping over a son, brother, or husband...' (Awadat, 2002; Hammer, 2002; IslamOnline, 2002; Williams, 2002b). She depicted her own and other women's destructive explosive potential in defense of community, even as she deployed Palestinian women as biological reproducers – 'Let Sharon the coward know that every Palestinian woman will give birth to an army of martyrs' – who threatened the Zionist settler-colonial project (Awadat, 2002; IslamOnline, 2002).<sup>13</sup> In a written note, she recalled the killing of Muhammad Dura,<sup>14</sup> and stated that 'Our duty is to take the soldier's life in the same manner they take ours' (Williams, 2002b).

**13** For discussion of the symbolic roles and demographic significance of Palestinian and Jewish women's 'wombs' and biological reproduction in Israeli-Palestinian contexts, see Kanaaneh (2002) and Kahn (2000).

**14** Muhammad Dura was the 12-year-old

In the most widely circulated post-mortem snapshots, Abu 'Aisheh wore a white headscarf, had Palestinian flag images on her clothing, and a banner with a picture of the Al-Aqsa mosque was hanging on the wall to her right (See figure 2). In her left hand she carried a knife aimed at her body, held her right index finger upward symbolizing 'one' (one God), and wore a dark green headband on which was written 'The Martyr 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades'. These poses and props indicate her combined nationalist-religious motivations, and that her ideological



Gazan who was unsuccessfully shielded by his father (Jamal Dura) from Israeli gunfire and was killed as they returned home from a used car lot on 30 September, 2000.

**Figure 2** An undated photo of Dareen Abu 'Aisheh distributed by her family in Nablus on 28 February, 2002 (Reuters, Abed Omar Qusini).

affiliation was with the Hamas militias, despite being prepared by the Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.

Itaf Ilayan, who served 10 years of a 15-year prison sentence for allegedly attempting a suicide/martyrdom attack in the mid-1980s, on behalf of Islamic Jihad, had publicly disagreed with Yassin's position on the issue of male accompaniment before Abu 'Aisheh's February operation: 'There is a hadith [saying] by the Prophet which says: 'If the enemy enters the house of Islam, the woman can go out [to fight] without her husband's permission and the slave without his master's permission'. Therefore Islamic shari'ah [law] does not obligate the female struggler who goes out to fight to be accompanied by a *mahram*'. She continued: 'From a practical angle, how can a female seeking martyrdom take a *mahram*, a brother or son, with her? The operation and the task of jihad will fail. Therefore necessities permit what is not allowed' (Isa, 2002). Following Abu 'Aisheh's death, Maha Abdel Hadi, a woman described as 'close to Islamic circles', similarly stated that 'Islam doesn't forbid women to choose martyrdom. Women have the right to resist the occupation by any means they choose. In the Palestinian context, martyr operations are permitted for all because

our women suffer from the Israeli aggression as much as our men' (Claudet, 2002). Ilayan, Abdel Hadi, and Abu 'Aisheh thus challenged religious rationales for women's exclusion with alternative interpretations that situated women as religious-national subjects with obligations to defend their community through martyrdom if necessary.

Following Akhras's operation in late March, the spiritual guide to Lebanon's (Shi'i) Hizbullah movement, Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, went even further in an interview with Al-Jazeera television by calling the women the authors of a 'new, glorious history for Arab and Muslim women'. He stated: 'It is true that Islam has not asked women to carry out jihad, but it permits them to take part if the necessities of defensive war dictate [this]. We believe that the women who carry out suicide bombings are martyrs' (Reuters, 2002).

In August 2002, the now deceased Gaza Hamas leader Shaykh Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi,<sup>15</sup> addressing a festival of the Islamic Action Front in Jordan by phone, remarked with implicit approval that 'the women of Palestine are following the example of al-Khansā' ('Report from Amman', 2002). Al-Khansā, also known as Tumadir bint 'Amr, was a renowned 7th-century (575–646) Arabian woman poet (in the elegiac genre) whose brothers were killed in tribal battles in the pre-Islamic period and whose four sons were killed in an early Islamic battle. In this case, al-Khansā is evoked for her well-known encouragement of war in the name of Islam in the battle of the Qadisiyya, and for articulating a desire to be congratulated rather than consoled at the death of her sons, since she became the mother of martyrs for Islam (Al-Mustafa, 1999; Disse, 2004). As Marilyn Booth argues, contemporary Islamist biographies of al-Khansā and other 'famous wombs' usually use the women to articulate a 'family-centred and Islamically defined social cohesion' that accents the importance of 'pious women...to the future of the rightly guided community' and a gendered division of public and private sphere participation (Booth, 2001: 306 and 307).<sup>16</sup> In discursively deploying al-Khansā, Rantisi commended Palestinian women not as militants, but as mothers and supporters of men who undertake such attacks, reinforcing Yassin's position that Muslim women's lawful role in jihad was to prepare men and sons for battle and mourn them proudly.

Since 2002, Palestinian Islamist discourses and attitudes regarding women and martyrdom attacks have shifted. On 19 May, 2003, Heba Daraghme, a devout university student from a village near Jenin, undertook a suicide/martyrdom attack under the sponsorship of the Islamic Jihad, reportedly with the co-sponsorship of the Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (el-Sawwaf, 2003; Ghazali, 2003). Hanadi Jaradat, also from Jenin, exploded herself and others on 4 October, 2003. Jaradat was a 29-year-old lawyer and activist in Islamic Jihad and was prepared by the organization (Agence France Presse, 2003; Blair, 2003; O'Loughlin, 2004). Reem Reyashi, a Gazan who attacked on 14 January, 2004, was a long-time Hamas activist and prepared by its 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, reportedly with the

**15** On 17 April, 2004, Rantisi was assassinated in Gaza City, as were his 27-year-old son and his bodyguard, by Israeli Air Force missiles fired at his car from helicopters (Dudkevitch and Keinon, 2004).

**16** For additional feminist commentary on al-Khansā and contemporary Arab discursive deployments (and silences) regarding her poetics and polemics, see Cooke (1997: 168, 169, and 175) and Booth (2001: 307 and 401).

co-sponsorship of the Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (Abu Ramadan, 2004; Majally, 2004; McGreal, 2004).

Following Reyashi's attack, a picture was released of her carrying an assault rifle in one hand and her almost three-year-old daughter, who was 'clutching a rocket grenade', in the other (Harnden, 2004). A writer in the Hamas newspaper reportedly defended her by arguing that with the final kiss to her two children, 'she was giving them power as a fighter and a martyr, which is higher than the quality of maternity' (Harnden, 2004). Yassin was reported to have been more pragmatic, stating that the 'current complicated Israeli security measures at checkpoints and roadblocks make it difficult for men to reach soldiers and settlers. Hamas saw that a woman could reach them and carry out a successful attack' (Abu Ramadan, 2004; Deutsche Presse-Agentur, 2004).<sup>17</sup>

## **feminist heroines and political agents**

The women bombers were venerated as heroes by Palestinian girls and women in the territories across religious and ideological lines, expressing the generalized militarization of the conflict, as well as their desire to actively participate (Hammer, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Rubin, 2002). Indeed, the Palestinian women undertook their attacks in a context of eclipsed women's political power and visibility. While the period between 1978 and 1991 in the territories was dominated by wide-ranging grassroots, non-violent mobilization of girls and women by the largely secular women's committees (Hiltermann, 1991), after the 1993 signing of the Oslo accords, the focus and nature of most women's organizations shifted from mobilization to state-building (Hasso, 1998, 2001). Like other organizations, they were unprepared for the explosion of popular resistance in 2000. During the Aqsa uprising, women activists and organizations refocused on the population's crisis needs while largely ceding the sphere of organized resistance and politics to men.

This explains some of the dynamics at the public memorial held for Wafa Idris in Ramallah on 31 January, 2002. The event included about 3,000 people, mostly women, and was led by the head of the Fatah women's committees, Rabeeha Thiab, making the 'procession a kind of feminist funeral' (Wahdan, 2002). In her speech, Thiab shouted to a cheering crowd: 'She's the mother of the martyr, sister of the martyr, daughter of the martyr – and now she's the martyr herself', and insisted that 'Nobody can prevent the women from taking part in this war toward liberating Palestine' (Wahdan, 2002). The crowd chanted 'Women standing beside men, hand in hand, will walk toward Jerusalem' (Wahdan, 2002), thus situating themselves at the centre of the Palestinian struggle and as equal defenders of Palestine's most important city.

One of the responses re-articulated a ritual well-established by the Palestinian women's committees by the early 1980s: a collective visit by women activists designed to lift morale and provide practical support to a family following a

**17** Speculation that a purported lover or her husband had compelled her to undertake such an attack (O'Loughlin, 2004; Al-Bawaba Reporters, 2004) was part of accounts that ignored Reyashi's own statements of violent intent (Al-Bawaba Reporters, 2004; Financial Times Information, 2004; McGreal, 2004).

politically related arrest, injury, killing, hospitalization, or prison release of an activist. In this tradition, following Takatkeh's 12 April attack, '[w]omen wearing the traditional clothes of the Bethlehem region, embroidered in black and red, defied Israeli troops to make their way in little groups to Takatka's home, singing patriotic songs'. According to the reporter, one of these women suggested to Takatkeh's family that the day of her attack should be considered 'her wedding day' (al-Batsh, 2002). (The most commonly used colloquial Arabic word for 'wedding' in Palestine [*farah*] also means 'joy' – 'wedding day' thus also translates into 'day of joy' [*yum al-farah*].) From one perspective, the deployment of the wedding trope resituated Takatkeh's act within a familiar patriarchal heteronormative family idiom. I would argue, however, that the women activists at the same time affirmed the mourning family by destabilizing the meaning of 'wedding day' and resignifying Takatkeh's death as a source of joy. I return to the issue of wedding tropes and martyrdom later.

Regional support for the women militants is consistent with Arab support for Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation. However, the daring of the women's acts also generated feminist pride and increased public display of militance among Arab, including Palestinian, women and girls throughout the region (See figure 3) (Hammer, 2002; Khuraynij, 2002; Khader, 2002). Arab satellite reports showed women in dramatic confrontations with riot police and soldiers, most often in Egypt, following Akhras's attack and the spring 2002 Israeli siege of the West Bank. The London *Daily Telegraph* reported from Egypt that women students at Cairo University described the Palestinian women militants as 'heroes of Islam for defending our holy land', and in Alexandria, women demonstrators threw stones at police guarding the Israeli consulate (Smucker, 2002). Women and girls in a number of Gulf countries interviewed on Al-Jazeera passionately defended Palestinian resistance and volunteered to undertake suicide attacks. The London-based Arabic newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi* reported that Saudis defied bans on demonstrations throughout the country, and in one of the largest of these (about 1,000 people), in Jeddah, 'the call for the demonstration was made in text messages transmitted on mobile phones, particularly among women. Following the evening prayers, women carrying the Palestinian flags and wearing the black and white checkered Palestinian head cover shouted slogans supporting the Intifadah and denouncing Arab impotence'. A total of 30 women demonstrators were arrested and one was beaten ('Saudis Defy', 2002).

It is as if when they inserted themselves – by dying and killing – into a sphere of politics dominated by men, the Palestinian women militants allowed other Arab girls and women to contest their own marginality in national and regional politics. Many seemed to interpret the Palestinian women militants as challenging the masculinity of the political domain and 'repudiating patriarchal norms of womanhood', as Neloufer de Mel argued was the case in nationalist representations of Sri Lankan women suicide bombers (Mel, 2001: 206 and 214



**Figure 3** Palestinian women in Beirut hold posters of Dareen Abu 'Aisheh (l) and Wafa Idris (r) during an International Women's Day protest and sit-in at the United Nations headquarters in Beirut on 8 March, 2002 (Reuters, Sharif Karim).

and 215). Such responses also bring to the fore the extent to which Arab women's political passions and anger regarding their subordination along a number of axes – usually sublimated and expressed in less dramatic forms and venues – are underestimated or reduced to reproductive and maternalist concerns by Arab, Palestinian and Israeli men.

### **allegories of the feminization of men**

Another striking theme in the responses to the women suicide bombers was the juxtaposition of weak Arab leaders against Palestinian resistance, especially by women, under conditions in which they are overwhelmingly outgunned. In this case, women gain some of the attributes of Arab masculinity conventionally deemed positive – bravery, courage, and willingness to sacrifice their lives to maintain honour and dignity – and men gain the attributes of femininity conventionally deemed negative – economic and political dependence, weakness, empty talk, and the inability to defend their honour and dignity. Salient in the examples below, but

not surprising given the cross-cultural prominence of these constructs, is how so many Arabs viewed their colonial and neo-colonial national status as feminizing them in relation to subordinating state powers, the United States and Israel most dramatically.

While the challenges to the masculinity of men political leaders were calls to political action, when deployed by women they also undermined the idea that such action in defense of community was solely the responsibility of men. When deployed by men, in contrast, they usually *undermined* women's political agency and became competitions between men regarding who is more masculine. An early and widely reported representation in this vein came from (former) Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. He viewed Idris's operation in terms of its effect on 'Western societies' who he believed will ask, 'What is this injustice suffered by the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular that could prompt women to carry out fedayeen operations? Moreover, this operation will impact on men, all men, in the Arab homeland. The fact that women have turned themselves into rifles will evoke men's sense of shame before their own women, before God, and before themselves' (Republic of Iraq Television, 2002a). The assumption undergirding his first point is that 'westerners' will wonder why *even* women, as presumably apolitical subjects, would be desperate enough to undertake such action.

In another televised report of a meeting in Baghdad between Hussein and Palestinian Foreign Minister Faruq Qaddumi, following Abu 'Aisheh's attack, the Iraqi president similarly referred to the Palestinian 'sense of honour' reaching a 'point where a Palestinian woman has turned into a rifle. It is a shame to men and to every Arab not to become a rifle like this woman' (Republic of Iraq Television, 2002b). The 'women becoming rifles' metaphor that was present in both television reports is a phallic representation that can also be viewed as a metonym for women, compelled by men's inaction, dangerously inverting the corporal/gender/political order by becoming men/gaining dominance. These representations concurrently diminished the masculine credentials of other Arab leaders and encouraged *men's* militance. Idris and Abu 'Aisheh, who were not invoked by name, were not addressed as political actors.

I found another narrative with a family resemblance to the one above, which I summarize as: 'Have we run out of real Arab men?' For example, while Al-Haj Abu-Ahmad, a leader of the Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, commended Idris as a hero and martyr in a telephone interview with the editor-in-chief of an Amman newspaper, he also made it clear that there were plenty of men and boys available and men had *allowed* Idris to undertake the attack to present her 'as a symbol of the Palestinian woman's struggle'. He assured the journalist that while 'scores of girls have approached' the brigades 'about their desire to carry out martyrdom operations' after learning of Idris's attack, 'the battalions are not thinking at present to use more martyrdom-seeking girls' ('Al-Haj Abu-Ahmad', 2002). This example, like the one above it, 'restored' (actually, it merely narrated) a gendered order in which

'real' men defended the community and family, and kept women under control, while women remained in their 'natural' place as the protected and obedient.

## **silences and fairy tales**

Since she was the first woman to undertake such an attack, Wafa Idris received more international and regional media attention than the typical Palestinian man bomber and more than two of the three Palestinian women bombers who followed her in 2002 (the exception is Ayat Akhras). The lack of significant regional attention to Dareen Abu 'Aisheh is a puzzle, since she was the first to leave a videotape explaining her intentions and actions. In comparing the cases, it is difficult to ignore the possible impact of the most widely distributed video images, photographs, and words of the women in allowing certain themes to develop. As I argue and illustrate below, some of these images, photographs, and words also produced silences.

The deployments of Idris demonstrated how images can be selectively used by various audiences to serve different purposes. In an undated photograph distributed to the media that was taken during the first uprising and became very prominent in the Occupied Territories and in pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Arab countries, a clearly much younger Idris is pictured wearing a black-and-white checkered kuffiyeh as a headband and the same pattern in a shirt, with a black jacket over the shirt. She wears no makeup and looks like a young rebel and tomboy. Following her death, a variant of this pre-womanly image was ubiquitous at her memorial service (See figure 4), as well as on wall posters in her refugee camp; it later hung on a large banner in the centre of Ramallah (Florio, 2002). Such images were consistent with local norms associating sedate dress with national mourning, and makeup and fancy clothing with inappropriate feminine frivolity.

In contrast, another picture that was widely distributed in the media, likely taken at a wedding celebration, showed Idris without a haircover, hair styled, and wearing makeup and fashionable clothing (See figure 5). This photograph and others like it allowed some of the post-mortem romantic deployments of Idris that emerged outside the territories. These included descriptions of her as 'stern-eyed, lush-lipped, [with] her auburn hair tumbling over her shoulders' (Florio, 2002; Kaplow, 2002). Arab pundits went further, positively juxtaposing the sacrifices of Idris against the Arab 'women of velvet chatting in the parlours' (Bennet, 2002).<sup>18</sup>

In Ayat Akhras's case, the photographs that primarily circulated came from a studio shot in which her long hair swung over her right shoulder so that it hung in front of her body, against a backdrop of a flowing river, two cabins, a short stone wall, and a tree (See figure 6). For both Idris and Akhras, these secular images, combined with certain stories, made them ripe for narratives outside the territories

**18** Parama Roy aptly wondered if such statements reflected a perspective that "the only good feminist is a dead feminist," given the frequent accusation by Arab men elites of Arab women feminists as elitist and Western-oriented (personal conversation, May 2004).





Figure 4 Palestinians holding posters of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Wafa Idris take part in a symbolic funeral for her in Ramallah on 31 January 2002 (AP Photo, Nasser Nasser).



**Figure 5** Undated photograph distributed by the family of Wafa Idris of al-Am'ari refugee camp in January 2002 (AP Photo, Nasser Nasser).

that combined gendered heroism and sacrifice with heterosexual romance and desire.<sup>19</sup> One Arab pundit, for example, described Akhras as 'A girl as tender and as beautiful as a rose [who] rings her thin waist with dynamites and blows herself up in the midst of Israeli groups in occupied Jerusalem, joining convoys of martyrs' (Atwan, 2002b).

For Idris, the stories were primarily about her difficult experiences as an emergency medical worker and her divorce, which was reportedly the result of her infertility (Bennet, 2002; Contenta, 2002; Hockstader, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Radin, 2002). For Akhras, the stories were driven by interviews with her shocked fiancé (who was quoted as saying: 'I will never forget her, she will always stay alive in my heart') and parents about her being an excellent student with plans to marry and attend university (Applebaum, 2002; Barr, 2002; Hazboun, 2002).

**19** A studio photograph of Andaleeb Takatkeh released to the media depicted her wearing makeup, a blue patterned hair kerchief, denim jeans, and a loose blue plaid men's shirt, against an English garden backdrop. This photo was not published widely and, indeed, Takatkeh garnered little press attention despite killing the highest number of

people in comparison to the women who preceded her. This is possibly because the attack occurred during US Secretary of State Colin Powell's emergency diplomatic visit to the area and he specifically condemned her attack and the US government pressured Arafat to do the same (Lamb, 2002a; Ratnesar *et al.*, 2002; Schmemmann, 2002).



**Figure 6** Undated but recent photograph of Ayat Ahkras of the Deheisheh refugee camp handed out by her family in March 2002 (AP Photo/Handout).

Harkening to my point about masculinities in the previous section, an article by the outspoken editor-in-chief of the London-based *Al-Quds al-Arabi* Arabic-language newspaper, Abd al-Bari Atwan, illustrates the selective evocation of the women martyrs/attackers, who were used as foils for Arab leaders represented as shamefully dishonorable and cowardly, and primarily concerned with preserving their personal power:

...what a shame it is for all the Arab leaders, especially those claiming to be progressive and accusing others of capitulation, when girls like Wafa Idris and Ayat al-Akhras come forward and sacrifice their lives for this nation's honor, dignity, and glory while these leaders are begging President Bush to intervene on their behalf and pleading with Sharon to take pity on them and on their shameful position that is embarrassing them before their peoples and even their wives and children.

(Atwan, 2002a)

Atwan did not refer to the second bomber, Abu 'Aisheh, I would argue, because she can be constructed in no other way but as a militant *woman* and a devout Muslim. The words, images, and known history of Abu 'Aisheh were not conducive to deployments of heterosexual romance, desire, frailty, and feminized beauty. According to an article about Abu 'Aisheh in *The Times* of London, for example, 'When your daughter is the kind of girl who dips her handkerchief in the blood of 'martyred' Palestinian fighters, rails at the shooting of pregnant women at Israeli checkpoints..., and is always the first to Hamas rallies, her dedication to the cause is beyond a doubt' (Farrell, 2002).

Like Akhras, Abu 'Aisheh was an excellent student, already attending university. Like Idris, her family was poor and she was recognized to be a longtime political activist by family and friends (Daraghmeh, 2002; Farrell, 2002). The only photographs released of her, however, showed her in Islamic dress and militant – pointing a knife at her own body. A male Arab Associated Press reporter described her in these photos as 'brandishing a knife', and '[s]taring into the camera with a dull gaze and dark rings under her eyes' (Daraghmeh, 2002). Similarly, most press narratives stressed her militancy, devout religiosity, and anger at men in Islamist organizations for not allowing women to engage in martyrdom operations (Contenta, 2002; IslamOnline, 2002; Williams, 2002a, b). I argue that Abu 'Aisheh was less likely to be invoked by Atwan and other men Arab pundits because while women contributing to the ultimate defense of the nation or community by losing their lives can be constituted as heroic and romantic, in circumstances such as hers, they may be too threatening to the gender order and difficult to sexualize, objectify, and thus contain within discourses highlighting marriageable beauty, feminine weakness, or womanly sacrifice.

A number of men mobilized reconstituted wedding imagery in their representations of Akhras (Barr, 2002; Rubin, 2002). A Saudi male columnist, praising the suicide bombings undertaken by Akhras and 'Abd al-Baset 'Oudeh, a Palestinian man whose attack immediately preceded hers, commended both bombers for heroism, courage, sacrifice, defense of religion, and homeland, and distrust of mere words (a reference to the Arab League summit in Beirut) or the counsel of Western governments. The praise of Akhras, however, also referred to her scheduled wedding: 'Marriage was before you; you were a girl engaged and looking forward to finishing your studies in order to wed – except you chose [to marry?] Allah, Paradise, and martyrdom'. (Al-Sa'adat, 2002). The most well-publicized of these narratives, by the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Dr. Ghazi al-Qusaybi, caused an international diplomatic stir (BBC News, 2002). Al-Qusaybi published a poem in the London-based Arabic language newspaper *Al-Hayat* on 13 April, 2002. In addition to making a bridal analogy ('bride of the Heavens'), Al-Qusaybi used Akhras's story as an allegory of Arab men's impotence and an example of decisive action rather than empty expression. The ineffectual men in his poem included Arab political and religious leaders ('the writers of fatwas')

(translated by Zafarul-Islam Khan, 2002). This poem produced complaints by Jewish groups that he was encouraging suicide attacks, and led the British Foreign Office 'to express its displeasure' with him (Khan, 2002; H. Al-Husayni, 2002; BBC News, 2002). Although Akhras was a fugitive from marriage because she killed herself before her scheduled wedding, both Saudi men's narratives re-situated her act within a bridal idiom, albeit one located in heaven.

Narratives related to marriage, martyrdom, and motherhood re-emerged following the death of the first married-with-children Palestinian woman suicide bomber/martyr, Reem Reyashi. Interestingly, one article in the Arab press went so far as to ask, 'Did Reem Love Allah More than Her Children?' (Al-Bawaba, 2004), implying that the answer was 'yes' and this was morally virtuous. Also, as indicated earlier, following Reyashi's death, some Islamists argued that being a fighter superseded motherly obligations for Palestinian women (Harnden, 2004).

Interestingly, Daniel Boyarin argues that eroticism, love, and the consumption of love were linked to 'dying for God' in the 'martyrology' of medieval Judaism and 'late antique' Christian traditions (Boyarin, 1999: 107). Moreover, Boyarin contends that metaphorically, some of the religious discourses of this period constructed Jews, since they were the martyred people of Israel, as 'brides of God – female, desiring subjects who render their desire in graphic description of the body of the desired divine male. Precisely because the desired object is male, within the normative heterosexuality of the text, the desiring subject is gendered female, whatever her sex' (Boyarin, 1999: 111). While I have not systematically explored narratives regarding Palestinian men and boy bombers to see how these issues may come into play, as indicated above, these 'bride of God' representations were sometimes present in narratives that emerged in response to the violence undertaken by some of the Palestinian women.

## **conclusion**

My analysis and understanding of suicide/martyrdom attacks takes for granted that Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip undertake them to resist settler-colonial domination at a historical point of Zionism's almost complete (ideological, economic, diplomatic, and military) 'triumph' over the native population (Verancini, 2002/2003: 38). Not insignificantly, this is the lens that structures the understanding of these acts by most of the colonized, irrespective of whether they support such methods of resistance (e.g. Adoni, 1997).

Lorenzo Verancini argues that suicide/martyrdom acts in such a situation should also be understood ontologically:

As in any colonial triumph, the colonized are expendable and, interiorizing his/her domination, know themselves as such. It should be noted that the control of the body has always been one of the master obsessions of the colonial mind, a fixation engendered by

the recognition of colonialism's outer limit. The Palestinians who annihilate themselves in order to kill would appear to face a condition in which their suicidal choice has become ontologically – and not only strategically – the only one available.

(Verancini, 2002/2003: 43)

Such an explanatory framework competes with two that are more dominant. Briefly, a 'gender-cultural' explanation assumes that women involved in such acts are the dupes of conniving men, doing so to escape lives of patriarchal misery and subservience, or to escape stains on their or their family's 'honour' because of some sexual violation (e.g. Dworkin, 2002; Victor, 2003; Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003; O'Loughlin, 2004).<sup>20</sup> 'Psychological' explanations assume that such acts are undertaken by individuals with a distorted sense of the world – they are pathological, brainwashed, barbaric, or sexually deprived (e.g. Fulford, 2001; Harnden, 2004; Intelligence & Terrorism Information, 2004).<sup>21</sup> While a framework such as Franz Fanon's attends to the subjective, psychic, and bodily dimensions of being colonized (Verancini, 2002/2003: 39), it also recognizes that such acts are inexplicable without taking into account their political and historical context. Recognizing the acts as anti-colonial resistance in a situation of overwhelming subjugation does not negate patriarchal societal operations, the relevance of psychological factors that may be relevant for some women and girls, or debates about the morality and short- and long-term implications of such a method.

The 2002 Palestinian women bombers inserted themselves into the political sphere in a gender-conservative period with few challenges to Arab male dominance in formal politics and militant activity. They situated their bodies and explained their actions in ways that both reproduced and undermined gender-sexual norms with respect to violence, politics, and community – corporeally and discursively destabilizing dominant notions of moral order and duty with respect to gender. Not surprisingly, their bodies, actions, and narratives became grist for various stories told by Arabs in the region about their own gender-sexual subjectivities. The discursive responses to these attacks give some indication of the fissures, contradictions, and sources of conflict within Arab societies. The manner in which the women situated their acts and many of the regional responses to their violence also speaks to the masculinities of state leaders in the region, whose economic, political, and military dependence on the United States, repressiveness and lack of accountability, and commitment to maintaining political power at almost any cost make them particularly vulnerable to gendered honour challenges from men and women.

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**20** Ibtisam Ibrahim has written a critique of the Dworkin article titled 'Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers: Are they Different?' (8 June, 2004, under journal review). Victor's sensationalistic book, which putatively relies on interviews with the families and friends of the four women who are the focus of my article, is full of factual inaccuracies (in addition to including no citations).

**21** Other studies are more pragmatic, focusing on the rationality of the actors and the conditions that produce suicide/martyrdom attacks, usually for the purposes of understanding and combating them (e.g. Gunaratna, 2000; Cronin, 2003; Zakaria, 2003).

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