



Tuning Out Hell's Harpists

Scott Atran

► **To cite this version:**

| Scott Atran. Tuning Out Hell's Harpists. 2004. <ijn_00000564>

HAL Id: ijn_00000564

https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_00000564

Submitted on 25 Jan 2005

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

TUNING OUT HELL'S HARPISTS

(by Scott Atran, November 2004, Update of Paper Presented to the Permanent Monitoring Panel on Terrorism, World Federation of Scientists, Geneva, October 2004)

Recently I returned from the occupied Palestinian territories. Northern Gaza is a charred battlefield, and almost every West Bank town is still ringed by guns, barbed wire and concrete. The economy is lifeless, except for Ramallah, seat of the Palestinian Authority's dysfunctional ministries and above all the NGOs that bring some activity. Palestinians are convinced that Israeli Army checkpoints - where people often wait hours to no avail in shadeless no man's lands or long tunnels - are meant to break their will and drive them from the land. Israelis counter that they stop on average at least one suicide bomber a day at the checkpoints and that Palestinians confuse cause (suicide bombing) with effect (extreme vigilance to stop it).

On one level, the iron-fist policy is working. Data on suicide attacks collected by one of Israel's top military strategists, Gen. Isaac Ben Israel, reveals that Hamas operations have been severely disrupted, reducing suicide attacks to pre-Intifada levels. He sees this creating a "window" to negotiate with moderate Palestinians who represent the majority's wish to have a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Ben Israel, who is also a world-class physicist and holds a PhD. in philosophy of science, explained that by sundering one-fourth to one-third of any system - molecules, information, army divisions, terrorist networks or what have you - the entire system either collapses (towards "entropy") or is forced to become a different sort of system altogether (by "mutating"). "In a year there will be no more Hamas," he asserted. "Or," I countered, "it may just change the way al-Qaeda did." Like pounding mercury with a hammer, military responses alone may breed only more decentralized - and less containable - forms of terrorism.

Near the Erez border crossing into Gaza, at Bayt Lahiyah, there is a spic and span apartment complex being built with money from the Arab Emirates, rising out of the filth and garbage. Israeli bulldozers and tanks have flattened all of the homes just in front of the complex, and people just sit by their makeshift tents, some bent over with their heads in their hands or just swaying back and forth. A little boy showed me where a bullet had scarred his back as he bent over to throw a stone at a tank (it would have gone through his skull had he been standing up straight). I asked him if he was looking forward to live in the new apartments. He didn't seem to know what I was talking about until I pointed, then his father said "*bukrah fil mishmish*" - tomorrow's apricots (something like "when pigs fly and chickens grow teeth"). "We will go on living in filth and dust." I wasn't sure if he was referring to the likelihood that the Palestinian Authority and their wealthy backers in the Emirates had already allotted the apartments to their own cronies (a standard practice), or whether this man was referring to prospects for peace. In any event, the little boy said he wanted to die as a martyr (*shaheed*), killing Israelis. The man, closing his eyes and with a deep guttural sigh, waved his boy away.

Sacred Values: A Moral Logic Insensitive to Costs and Benefits

Within this vicious spiral attitudes harden. Few in Israel now expect to offer concessions like those made at points at Camp David in 2000, Taba in 2001 and Geneva in 2003. The real sticking there were not over amount of territory or compensation, but over conflicting "sacred values" associated with the Holy Land's inviolability and a moral Right of Return. Leading Palestinian Muslim clerics insist that God will not permit Muslims to cede any sovereignty over the *Al Haram Al Sharif* Mosque compound. For Israel's chief rabbi, it would be "sacrilege" to even engage in negotiations over the Jerusalem mount that is also revered by Jews. Although polls by the Palestinian Center for Survey and Policy Research show few

refugees wanting to take up residence in Israel - only one percent if required to become Israeli citizens - Palestinians won't abandon, and Israelis won't accept, return as a moral right.

Sacred values are not very sensitive to calculations of cost and benefit, to quantity or to tradeoffs - a fact ignored in rational choice and risk assessment models that drive much political negotiation and counter-terrorism efforts. Consider suicide bombers. The most idealistic and often brightest young men prepare to become suicide bombers – martyrs for the sacred value of “land and honor” (*ard wal 'ard*). I asked all would-be martyrs I interviewed questions of the sort, “Is a person a better and more deserving martyr if kills one rather ten of the enemy or ten rather than a hundred?” All responded that it wouldn't matter if the martyr killed no one but himself or all the enemy. Said one, “if his intention is pure God must love him.”

I also asked: “So what if a your father was dying and your mother found out about the operation and asked you to delay it at least until the family could get back on its feet, would you?” All answered that there is a duty to family and a duty to God and that the duty to God cannot be delayed, even for a minute. “What if a rich relative were to give a lot of money to the cause if you postponed your action?” More than one answered: “Is that a joke?” Policymakers from nations that fight sacred terror and hope to defeat it need to understand that earnest young people are fast reaching the point at which commitment becomes absolute and nonnegotiable, and every effort must be made to reach them before their dreams end only in apocalyptic hopes of salvation.

Of course, social psychologists will rightly tell you that responses to questions are different, more nuanced, if you take a person to side, away from the group, and ask the same questions. This leads some academic theorists to argue that apparent commitment to absolute moral values is just “posturing.” Here, though, it's the group context that determines action - unto death (the ultimate “behavioral variable”). There is no case of a Hamas operative having committed himself to martyrdom who decides to later to withdraw from the operation (although there are a few cases from Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Al 'Aqsa Martyrs Brigades). These young men persevere not because of threats or physical coercion (unlike the Tamil Tigers who may threaten a wavering volunteer for suicide attack with actions against the family). On the contrary candidate martyrs are told – and no one doubts – that they would be allowed to withdraw any time. But (as with the Japanese Kamikaze) candidates also acknowledge that once they take final vows – usually in the form of a video testament – retraction would make life unbearably humiliating.

Political scientists and economists, who generally try to explain human behavior in terms of “utility,” also point out that if a person truly believes in the rewards of Paradise or in the likelihood that his family will be materially rewarded for his sacrifice, then his decision to die is a “rational choice.” Theorizing this way about people's expectations of Paradise is speculative, ethnocentric and psychologically groundless, based on no knowledge of what motivates someone in a different culture to die for a different cause. Material compensation to the martyr's family is rarely if ever a factor in a person's decision to blow himself up. Any witness to how Israel deals with suicide bombing knows that that risk of material loss almost always far outweighs likely gain - the family's home is usually demolished and surviving kinfolk tracked and harassed. Moreover, “If a youth knocks saying he wants to be a martyr to get sex in Paradise or money for his family, we slam the door,” huffed one Hamas organizer.

Suicide Bombers: Educated, Idealistic, Psychologically Fit and Socially Committed

The one place in Nablus where young people easily express optimism in the future is al-Najah University. More than half of the 12,000 students belong to the Hamas Student Block, which has produced more suicide bombers than another demographic group in the country. Despite the myths about terrorism that our politicians and pundits spin, none of those supporters of suicide terrorism whom I interviewed were poor, uneducated, socially estranged, or psychologically deranged. (University of Pennsylvania forensic psychiatrist Marc Sageman finds a similar pattern among al-Qaeda recruits). According to psychologist Ariel Merari, who has interviewed nearly all would-be suicide bombers who have been captured, neither do they likely have a criminal past. They express no hatred of liberty, freedom or democracy, and could well embrace these if they had them. The attitudes of these students underscore data collected by University of Michigan political scientist Mark Tessler and Princeton economist Alan Krueger that suggest that the best predictor of popular support for suicide attack is lack of civil liberties and the unresponsiveness of one's own government.

Those who would be martyrs have all the idealism and commitment of educated youth in our own culture who think they can solve the problems of their world. At the Universal Forum of Cultures in Barcelona, philosopher Dan Dennett recently asked, "Can human beings learn to be pure altruists?" Among the youth of Nablus and Gaza you will find an answer. According to Sheikh Hamed al-Betawi, the leading Palestinian Islamist cleric and spiritual guide for Hamas: "Our martyrs are the purest of the pure. Learned in religion, but also often in mathematics or engineering, even the arts. They are not poor or hopeless but full of possibilities and hope." Independent doctoral research by Claude Berrebi and Basel Saleh indicate that most Hamas bombers have college education and are economically better off than the surrounding population.

These are the prize souls that Hamas strives capture. Unlike regular armies or police, revolutionary and insurgent movements can survive only if recruits willingly forego material incentives and delay gratification. These movements look for signals of such character, such as a candidate's investment in education. Organizations that sponsor suicide terror go a step further: through spectacular displays involving the sacrifice of their precious "human capital" (educated youth with better-than-average prospects) they also signal a costly commitment to their community, which the community honors by providing new recruits and added funding. With more peaceful and legitimate avenues for political expression blocked, this becomes an effective way to increase the organization's political "market share" in the community. In light of this compelling rationality, Ben Israel stresses: "I use the word 'victims' to describe the volunteers for suicide bombing. They are victims of their society."

Social psychologists have long documented what they call "the fundamental attribution error," the tendency for people to explain human behavior in terms of individual personality traits, even when significant situational factors in the larger society are at work. This attribution error leads many in the US to focus (unlike Ben Israel) on the individual suicide terrorists rather than the organizational environment which produces them. If told that someone has been ordered to give a speech supporting a particular political candidate, for example, most Americans will still think that the speaker believes what he is saying. Despite study after study of individual behavior that shows situation to be a much better predictor than personality in group contexts, Americans overwhelmingly believe that personal decision, success, and failure depend on individual choice, responsibility, and personality.

Terrorist Networks: Foremost Kith and Kin

For those young people who actually make the sacrifice, moral principle and fervor undoubtedly trump rational interest. But the reasons that martyr-sponsoring organizations

sacrifice their best and brightest derive more from hard-nosed calculations of utility and material consequences, although the foundational assumptions for their religious and ideological agenda (as for *any religious* agenda, whether Muslim or not) lies beyond the pale of rational scrutiny. This isn't to say that the leaders who send out their minions to die are merely cynical rational actors, for they too have fire and passion. Berkely economist Robert Frank suggests that such manipulation works persistently only if the manipulators themselves sincerely make costly, hard-to-fake commitments. "I say to you what I said to Israeli intelligence and to 400,000 people at Al Aqsa Mosque," al-Betawi raged, "I am ready to pay the price. I was deported to Lebanon with al-Rantisi and, God willing, I will be a martyr too. I know Israeli prisons and so do five of my children, but they know from me that Muslims and their culture fear no privation or death."

Recruitment into Hamas is not like recruitment into the US Army or an American university. From interviews in Nablus and Gaza, it seems to be almost entirely a grass-roots operation that is bottom up rather than top down in the sense that individuals in the organizations bring in other family members, neighborhood friends or co-worshippers from the local Mosque. Often the recruiter only implicitly or intentionally recruits those around him by talking to them or simply by setting an example. Rarely is anyone given instructions or orders for recruitment. (True, US Army recruits tend to come from certain towns and regions, and many have had family in the Army, but the social networking in Hamas is much denser and direct).

These decentralized kinship, ethnic and religious networks offer a good foundation for sustaining resource-deficient insurgencies because they provide a social structure that can underpin the maintenance of reputations and the efficient gathering of information about candidate members to ward against defection. No one is going to risk bringing in a potential defector from his own family because the defection would sully the reputation of that persons whole family. And in Arab society, family reputation based on purity of lineage and honor is the still a main determinant of economic, social and political status. This thick web of social ties also makes it very difficult for counterintelligence to penetrate. (There is some contradictory indication, mostly by Khalid al-Farraj and Abd-al-Rahman al-Rushud, that al-Qaeda may coerce people into staying who may otherwise wish to leave, but most accounts show a recruitment pattern somewhat similar to Hamas).

Through student groups and social clubs that often begin in kindergarten years, Hamas creates families of friends and disciples who are just as willing to sacrifice for one another as sibling for sibling or a parent for a child. These culturally manipulated loyalties mimic and (at least temporarily) override genetically based fidelities to kin while securing belief in sacrifice to a larger group cause. The mechanism of manipulation resembles that of the US or Israeli army, which trains soldiers in small groups of committed buddies who then grow willing to sacrifice for one another, and only derivatively for glory or country (motherland, fatherland). (Consider the Oath to Jihad taken by recruits to *Harkat ul-Mujahideen*, a Pakistani affiliate of the *World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders*, the umbrella organization formed by Bin Laden in 1998. The oath affirms that, by their sacrifice, members help secure the future of their family of fictive kin: "Each [martyr] has a special place among them are brothers, just as there are sons and those even more dear.")

Evolutionary Reverberations: Kin Altruism, Vengeance, Romantic Love

Kin altruism is a yearning rooted deep in human evolutionary biology, which group leaders become expert at in turning to their advantage. Another profound evolutionary motive for human social and political action is revenge. Nobel Prize winning ethologist Konrad Lorenz noted that when a weaker animal bares its teeth to threaten a stronger animal, the stronger one will sometimes back off because the expected cost of battling the weaker foe rises to

where the stronger animal calculates that it's just not worth the effort. When a person vows to avenge an insult or humiliation *no matter the cost, even if it means losing his own life* and shows that he means it with costly and hard-to-fake displays of preparation for attack then anyone planning an insult will think twice before acting. In terms of primate evolution, including human evolution, accepting humiliation means not only a loss of self-worth but is signal proof of inferiority and probable extinction in the social competition for status, wealth, mates and a place in the sun. Revenge can give even the weak a better chance to survive in the long run.

Often just displaying sincere preparation for revenge is enough to deter a would-be aggressor. To convince the other side that your side is sincerely willing to go beyond any rational limit for self-preservation, part of the display will usually include suggestions of an automatic triggering mechanism. This implies that when the aggressor goes too far, then the display turns into counter-aggression that cannot be stopped even if one or both sides wanted to change course. According to University of Maryland political scientist Thomas Schelling, this was a basis for the Cold War defense strategy of mutually assured destruction, or MAD.

Although such apparently irrational strategies override rational calculations and control, they do make reasonable sense in the "longue durée," that is, from the evolutionary vantage of our species. On the average, and over the long run, it is to a person's advantage to employ such a strategy even at the cost of immediate self-interest and even if, on occasion, the person dies acting out the strategy. This is even clearer with kin altruism. As the biologist William Hamilton showed, in the evolutionary long run what matters is not whether an individual dies young but whether the organism's genes survive. People are mortal but their genes drive them to act in ways that allow the genes themselves to achieve a kind of serial immortality. If by sacrificing one's life for a close family member, a person's genes have a better chance of being passed on down the line, then it becomes much more likely that the person will make the sacrifice. Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker emphasizes that these sorts of sacrifices needn't be, sometimes can't be, and often shouldn't be consciously thought out. Our emotions have evolved to unconsciously push us to immediate decisions that likely have long-term value. (Think of sex, which the emotions provoke for instant pleasure, but which evolution designed for long and laborious reproduction).

But such emotionally-driven strategies, because they can trump reason, also get out of control – for example, with suicide bombers who usually lose their lives (not just "on occasion") before having a chance for them or their kin to reproduce. Duels at sundown and never-ending family vendettas, like the Hatfields and McCoys, are also derivative forms of this behavior gone beyond control. Hamas leaders and followers nearly all stress that revenge is for national – not personal – humiliation (*idhlal*), which will probably take more than a lifetime of struggle. "We fight for dignity (*karama*), nation (*watan*), religion (*din*) and *Al 'Aqsa*," Betawi preached to me, citing the Quran (*Al-Tauba* 111) "God brings souls to Paradise killing the enemy and getting killed – that is the high principle of *jihad* (*mabada samia fil jihad*)." Harvard political scientist Jessica Stern, after years spent interviewing terrorists of every color who target civilian noncombatants, surmises that humiliation is the one common motivator for them all.

I asked Betawi: "Why do you think God created some people to kill and some to be killed?" "I will tell you," he nodded, "God creates all people equal but He gives them a choice – the choice of submission (*islam*) and Heaven or war (*harb*) and Hell. Our martyrs (*shohada*) are warriors of God (*mujahideen*) not terrorists (*muharbiyeen*). That is why I issued a religious edict (*fatwah*) that they will go to heaven. They are not afraid of anything. They will fight until *jihad* has ended." "And when is that?" I pressed. He drew back his sleeve and waved a

surprisingly powerful forearm: “When injustice has ended. When this global regime – the snake with America as its head - is destroyed.” This was the first time since I began talking with Hamas shortly after its founding in 1987 that I sensed the mission of national redemption merging with Global Jihad. (Israel and the US claim this was true even before September 11, but there was little evidence for it then, and there is an element now of self-fulfilling prophecy).

In the arts department at al-Najah I was led through an exhibit whose boast was “Martyrs give us dignity to free ourselves.” The blazing eyes in two paintings of covered faces resembled the intense gazes of the two artists nearby. “Who are these martyrs?” I asked. “Soon to be, if God wishes,” answered one. Their yearning for Paradise is conveyed through images of another apparently irrational longing, romantic love, incarnated in the black-eyed maidens of martyrs’ heaven. Sincere expressions of romantic love - which occur in all cultures, most powerfully among young adults - signal a person’s enduring commitment to another person, even in situations where forsaking the loved one would accrue more immediate benefits (say, a more attractive, richer or more fertile partner).

Key to intercepting fatal commitment before it solidifies, then, is grasping how, like good commercial advertisers but to ghastlier effect, charismatic leaders of martyr-sponsoring organizations turn ordinary desires for kinship, religion, status and love into cravings for the mission they are pitching, to the benefit of the manipulating organization rather than the individual manipulated. (Much as the pornography or fast food and soft drink industries manipulate innate desires for naturally scarce commodities like sex or fatty foods and sugar to ends that may reduce personal fitness but benefit the manipulating institution).

The mock up of Paradise at the al-Najah Martyr’s exhibit included a small pool of water, covered with plastic flowers and leaves, and surrounded by paintings of red and white roses and recently slain Hamas leaders Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdul Azziz Rantisi. Little teddy bear key chains were offered, and books sold – most prominently the “Islamic Manifesto,” *Milestones*, written in prison by the Muslim Brotherhood’s Sayyid Qutb just before he was hanged in 1966 for sedition by Egyptian leader Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser.

The anti-Semitic tract, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, was also on sale. I asked: “What if you take a child from a Zionist family at birth and raise him in a good Muslim family, would the child grow up to be a good Muslim, a bad Muslim or a Zionist.” “A good Muslim,” all around answered. Merari told me that in his interviews with Hamas prisoners in Israeli jails he also found no systematic Nazi-like racial hatred, despite the negative social stereotypes about Jews.

A person is what his surroundings make him,” said the Block leader. “Then why do you kill Israeli children?” I shot back. “We do not target the children,” he calmly explained, “but we do not mourn them if they are killed on an Israeli bus or if the children happen to be in the way (*awlad yaktarunna haqada fil tariq*) because Israeli society will turn them into soldiers who will try to kill us. Would we do an operation like the one that Sheikh Bin Laden did to America or our Chechen brothers did in Beslan? No, that is not our way, although what happened in Beslan is understandable and even justifiable because the Russians have killed so many Chechen children.”

I posed the same question that I had posed to al-Betawi. “You say ‘An eye for an eye,’ but then won’t the whole world become blind?” he answered much as did al-Betawi: “Should we turn the other cheek or offer flowers? Do the Jews or Christians? We fight with any means (*ayit wasalah*). They have tanks, planes and atom bombs. We have human bombs (*qanabil bi sharia*). When they stop killing us we will stop killing them.” I lectured that the fourth

Geneva Convention is all about ends not justifying means, no matter how just or unjust a war. "Do the Americans who raped innocents at Abu Ghraib honor the Geneva Convention?" he retorted. "Do the Israelis honor the Geneva Convention when they kill our children?"

Hamas talk of justice against oppression is "a big lie," counters Ben Israel. "So, what is the target if not the children? The bus by itself? Who were the other persons in the bus or in a restaurant? Soldiers? No, they were all either children or women or male civilians, and I think this is the main moral difference between guerrilla fighters, freedom fighters and the terrorists. I don't think that what happens in Iraq, for example, is terrorism when actions are directed against the ruling forces. When an Israeli army unit is attacked in the occupied territories, it is not terrorism. But bombing children in a bus with the excuse that one day they will be soldiers is a morally wrong attitude. What will prevent us from dropping some doomsday weapon on Gaza and end the conflict with the Palestinians in a few seconds? Or, not to be so extreme, to send our air-force to bomb daily refugee camps, with conventional weapons (I estimate we can kill more than 10,000 people a day in this "method"). The only 'obstacle' is ethical."

A senior Hamas organizer in Gaza's Jabaliyah refugee camp frowned when I smiled at the children running home from school. "Why do you smile? We can't smile until we take back our life from the Israelis. When you see our children you should weep because the best hope for them now is to become martyrs." "So all should become martyrs," I asked. "Not all our people are heroes," he shook his head, "but our youth are running to martyrdom. With so many we must carefully select, case by case, who has courage and purity of heart." I wanted to know if he would accept a two-state solution. "Never," he said, "all of Palestine must be Muslim." "And the Jews?" I asked. "Let them go back to New York and Russia. Those born in Palestine may stay as long as they submit to Muslim rule and law."

An earnest young man of twenty cleared a seat for me from the rubble and garbage, "I choose to be a martyr because my life is dear to me, my family and my people. We must show Israelis that Palestinian lives aren't cheap." He was as compassionate in manner as anyone I've interviewed in my anthropological sojourns among the world's cultures and as bright as any student I've taught science to. He so reminded me of my own son that I just lost it for a moment and turned my head away. He seemed to understand and tried in his own way to console me: "Never mind, I won't just give up my life. Our leaders don't think once or twice, but ten, even a hundred times if it's worth it. If they can do a roadside bombing they won't use me. I'll be saved for a big operation." This young man could contemplate the costs and benefits of a roadside versus suicide bombing within the group's moral frame, though it was beyond doubt that sometime soon he must die to kill. I asked him, "And what would make you and other stop thinking about becoming martyrs?" He smiled ruefully and said, "When Palestine is again Muslim."

On a second floor walkup off a narrow alley in Jabaliyah I interviewed the family of Nabeel Masood, the sixteen year-old from Al 'Aqsa Martyrs Brigades who exploded himself in Ashdod in April. The neighborhood knew him as a kind and gentle boy, but he changed after the death of his two favorite cousins, who were Hamas fighters. His mother was reading a letter when I walked in the door, and handed it to me:

"Mr. and Mrs. Masood, it gives me great pleasure to inform you that your son Martyr Babeel[sic], has passed his tests successfully in the 11th grade. He was first in his class. He was distinguished not only in his hard studying, sharing, and caring, but also in his good morals and manhood. I would really like to congratulate you for his unique success in both life and the hereafter. You should be proud of your son's martyrdom."

I asked his father, "Do you think the sacrifice of your son and others like him will make things better for the Palestinian people?" "No," he said, "this has not brought us even one step forward." The boy's mother only wants the pieces back of her son's body and the father has emptied the house because it is Israel's policy to destroy any martyr's family home although he and his wife would have done anything to stop their son if they had known. "It can't go on like this," the father lamented, "There can only be two states, one for us and one for the Israelis. Nabeel's friends, classmates and neighborhood youth disagree: "His courage will make us free," is the refrain.

In *The Descent of Man* and *The Expression of Emotion in Men and Animals*, Charles Darwin noted that young males - roughly between 16 and 25 - commit nearly all human violence, especially when they feel pushed to the wall. Aggression and counter-aggression evolved in young men to help them fight to spread their genes. But gray men have learned to harness and direct a young man's passion for their own purposes. Chanting hymns of heaven, these harpists of hell pluck the evolutionary strings that drive the sacrificial young.

I returned to Israel on a Friday evening. Unlike Jerusalem, which is quiet on the Jewish Sabbath, Haifa atop Mount Carmel was alight. Joyful groups of high-school girls were scurrying everywhere. I asked three hitchhikers who were holding hands, just like my daughters do with their friends, if anything special was up. "Yes," said one girl, very sweetly, "So you're not from Haifa; you see it's a weekend and holiday, and no school!" Hamas leaders contend that these young girls, too, merit death because they will become Israeli soldiers. The Hamas weekly, *Al Risala*, proclaimed in an editorial that "martyrs are youth at the peak of their blooming, who at a certain moment decide to turn their bodies into body parts - flowers." In a moment of naive epiphany, I knew that if this blossoming young woman could just spend a little time with one of these young men from Gaza neither would need to die. But the wall broadens between them each passing day, blocking all human touch.

The best hope to stop suicide terrorism will not be found in psychological profiling, more learning, economic programs or physical elimination because those willing to die to kill are mostly normal, educated, materially sufficient and in abundant supply. We would do better to understand how terrorist groups "acculturate" recruits and exploit biologically deep desires for dignity and belonging, and why the surrounding community abides self-elimination of its most precious parts. One thing for certain, these idealistic youths aren't nihilists who "hate freedom," contrary to the mantra of politicians and pundits who dehumanize them to better mobilize our public for fight. To break the culture of martyrdom that is exploding across the world we must offer these young people alternative ways to socialize their needs and passions. History suggests that democracy is a good bet, but one too willingly postponed when results may be undesirable

Political Postscript: Post-Arafat and Hamas

In nearly everyone's view, Yasser Arafat's death has opened a new window onto the Middle East "Road Map for Peace," launched in 2003 by the United Nations, the European Union, Russia and the US to achieve a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian settlement by 2005. Until now, the US focus on the Road Map had been tacit support for Israel's efforts to undermine Mr. Arafat, the Palestinian Authority's ever popular but increasingly ineffective leader, block elections for fear of renewing his mandate, and kill off Hamas leaders. President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon still come up short on concrete steps for the Road Map, and hedge against it being implemented by next year as originally planned, or even by the end of either leader's tenure. But there is little doubt that the US and Israel want to help PLO head Mahmud Abbas, Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmad Qurie, Foreign Minister Nabil Shaat, and their friends. US and Israeli leaders are aware of the need to ease pressure on the

Palestinians so that elections can be held in the next few months as this moderate leadership plans.

Coming on the heels of the Afghan vote, and timed to begin shortly before Iraqi elections scheduled for early next year, a peaceful Palestinian election process could revive hopes for a settlement (and possibly help with Iraq). The prospect of “liberty” transforming the Middle East would suddenly seem more than the far-fetched rhetoric of earlier this year when the US stymied Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani’s election efforts in Iraq and tacitly supported Israel’s belligerent refusal to let Palestinians register to vote.

The problem, cautions Israeli historian Reuven Paz, former director of Shin Beit’s research division and of the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, is that Hamas has become “the most authentic representative of Palestinians in the Territories, unlike the old national establishment of the PLO and Palestinian Authority.” Gen. Ben Israel, a chief architect of Israel’s current counter-terrorism campaign, believes that Hamas will lose the elections only “as long as it cannot show results in terms of dead bodies. Therefore, I don’t see any contradiction in killing the activists of this group while trying to come to some political agreement with others. Paradoxical as it sounds, attacking Hamas will help the moderate Palestinian forces. Elections are very important for establishing their authority, and Hamas will not win if they don’t have known political leaders left who have the support of the masses.”

Khalil Shikaki, director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, doesn’t think that Palestinian majority-support for Hamas suicide actions translates into support for its political program. The center’s polls indicate most Palestinians would accept the two-state solution that Hamas rejects. The polls also forecast a winning electoral coalition of moderate “old guards” with more militant but mostly secular “young guards.” Shikaki believes the best way to defang Islamists and produce a political settlement is to bring them into parliament. But to keep the process on track, how to stop Hamas from suicide attacks and the Israeli army from targeted assassinations, which each side sees as very cost-effective actions against the other in the short term? Washington has (limited) influence over Israel, but no one seems to have leverage over Hamas.

At the moment, all Palestinian factions seem interested in preventing intra-Palestinian violence. But Hamas has already decided to boycott the elections for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority – an authority that stems from the 1993 Oslo accords that Hamas shuns. Moreover, Hamas regularly resorts to suicide bombings to bolster its political fortunes, and Israel will not hesitate to strike back. In any event, Sheikh Hamed al-Betawi, the leading Palestinian Islamist cleric and Hamas spiritual guide, forewarns: “All of Palestine is Muslim and Israel will be expelled, if not now, later - just like the Crusaders and Mongols were expelled. We can accept a ceasefire, but not forever.” Hamas leaders never use the word *salaam* - peace - in dealing with Israel, only *hudnah* - pause. Notes Ben Israel: “Even the Al-‘Aqsa Brigades who are engaged in murderous terrorism, still are reporting to Fatah, and therefore view their actions as a struggle toward some compromise between the two peoples. Hamas is not ‘fighting’ for the same cause.”

Israeli settlers who refuse to evacuate Gaza also proclaim sacrifice and duty to God with hard-to-fake commitments, rejecting offers of hundreds of thousands of dollars in individual compensation with displays of outrage and disgust. The hold that sacred values have over the heart and mind is not easily sundered because – for good or bad – they speak to deeper, more enduring yearnings. Consider that a large segment of the US population, the rural and religious working poor, seems to have voted in November against its rational self interest in

favor of symbolic affirmations for policies that have arguably produced only negative effects on its everyday economic life.

Some years ago, when secular ideology and reasoning seemed triumphant everywhere, French statesman and literary giant André Malraux wrote: "The 21st century will be spiritual, or won't be." We all seem to be living under the Chinese curse of "interesting times," when the deepest parts of human nature erupt into politics and again tear history wide open. A Gallup survey carried out in 60 countries and released in November showed that people around the world largely mistrust their leaders and nearly half fear the future will be less safe for their children. Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might secure history new direction.

Historical Epilogue: Humanity's Birth and Last Great Hope

"Civilization is intermittent."
- Menahem Begin

To capture the hearts and souls of people around them, terrorist groups provoke their enemies into committing atrocities. Two millennia ago, the first Jewish Revolt against Roman occupation began with youths throwing stones, and Roman commanders telling their soldiers to sheathe their swords and defend themselves with wooden staves. The Jewish Zealots and Sicarii ("daggers") upped the ante – much as Hamas would do later against Israelis and Iraqi insurgents increasingly do against America's coalition - attacking Roman soldiers and their Greek underlings in self-sacrificial acts during public ceremonies. The Sicarii, who claimed to be freedom fighters but whom the Romans deemed terrorists, modeled their mission on Samson, who centuries before had brought down on himself a Philistine temple to help Israel.

The Jewish revolt ended with collective suicide of perhaps hundreds of Sicarii warriors and their families at the desert-fortress of Masada in 73 A.D. But that was hardly the end of the story. This "heroic" death inspired two subsequent revolts, ending with Rome expelling all Jews from Judea, including many Christians who still considered themselves Jews. Judea became "Palaestina," renamed for the Philistines. The Jewish Diaspora spread a universalizing faith to the far corners of the world, eventually converting the Roman emperor Constantine and the Arabian trader Mohammed to monotheism.

Ever since the Enlightenment, the modern world's major movements – the big "isms" of recent history - have been on a mission to invent "humanity" by saving it and making it their own. Modernism is the industrial legacy of monotheism (however atheist in appearance), secularized and scientifically applied. No non-monotheistic society (save Buddhism perhaps) ever considered that all people are, or should be, essentially of a kind. To many in our society, the 20th-century demise of colonialism, anarchism, fascism and communism left history's playing field wide open to what Lincoln besought as "the last great hope of mankind," our society's ideal of democratic liberalism (though Lincoln, like Jefferson, foresaw that the U.S. would "meanly lose" this hope if advanced by the sword).

The trouble with missionary modernism– is that those who do not accept falling into one's own camp - say, "The House of Islam" or "The House of Democracy"- automatically belong to "The House of War" and "Evil." That means that a great chunk of residual humanity remains destined to be despised and warred upon. Even after 9/11, there is scant recognition that unforeseen events of history perpetually transform or destroy the best laid plans for historical engineering. Yet the catastrophic wars and revolutions of the modern era teach us that the more uncompromising the design and the more self-assured the designer, the harder both will fall. President Bush, in his preamble to *The National Security Strategy of*

the U.S., seems to reach a contrary conclusion – that these great struggles demonstrate “a single sustainable model of national success... right and true for every person, in every society.”

If we take an evolutionary perspective on history, which frames success and failure in terms of the growth or decline of traits over populations (and, eventually, in terms of the growth or decline of populations themselves), then current U.S. (or Israeli) antiterrorism policies do not seem adaptive. Support for the U.S. (and Israel) is declining in the world as support for terrorism increases. Moreover, U.S. (and Israeli) procedures to combat terror are often predictable and reactive, whereas increasingly many people in the world perceive the terrorists to be innovative and proactive. Such perceptions - even if short-sighted - invariably act upon the future in unpredictable ways that make it folly and hazardous to believe in the constancy “clashing civilizations,” the inevitability of the world’s globalization (“Americanization” for some), an overriding “logic of human destiny,” or some guiding spirit that ultimately causes “the end of history” and political struggle in a “fully rational” (secular, democratic, economically liberal) world.

Defend against Jihadism we must, and help it to burn itself out. But let’s not add life to its forlorn mission by unrelentingly muscling others with our own. Preempting and preventing sacred terror requires that policymakers make a concerted effort to understand the background conditions as well as the recruitment processes that inspire people to take their own lives in the name of a greater cause. Current political and economic conditions that policymakers currently monitor are important although not necessarily determinant. Rather, what likely matters more is the promise of redeeming real or imagined historical grievances through a religious (or transcendent ideological) mission that empowers the militarily weak with unexpected force against enemies materially much stronger. This was as true for Jewish Zealots who sacrificed themselves to kill Romans two millennia ago as it is for modern Jihadists.

Clearly, none of this necessitates negotiating with terrorist groups that sponsor martyrs in the pursuit of closed societies. For these groups and already committed individuals, using hard power may be necessary. The tens of millions of people who sympathize with them, however, are likely open to the promise of soft-power alternatives that most Arabs and Muslims seem to favor—participatory government, freedom of expression, educational possibility, economic choice. The historical precondition for such opportunity, as well as the popular legitimacy of any form of governance, to be effective, however, is to ensure that potential recruits in the Arab and Muslim world feel secure about personal safety as well as their cultural heritage. Although such soft-power efforts may demand more patience than governments under attack or pressure to reform tend to politically tolerate in times of crisis, forbearance is necessary to avoid increasingly catastrophic devastation to the future hopes of peoples who aspire to soft empowerment from an open society and free world.

Biologist Ernst Mayr tells us that the average life span of a species on earth is about 100,000 years -more or less the current age of *Homo sapiens*. Perhaps Lincoln was right that democracy is humankind’s final gamble, though evolution and history also teach that if we try to reduce variation to one basic form for all, and wall off those who do not readily fit our own image and self-interest, then we will probably bring on our own collapse.

Scott Atran, a research scientist at the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris and at the University of Michigan, is author of “In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion” (Oxford, 2002), and “The Native Mind: Biological Reasoning and Environmental Decision Making Across Cultures (MIT, forthcoming with Douglas Medin)

satran@umich.edu