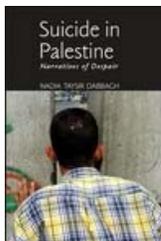


The Political as Personal: The Human Side of Suicide Among Young Palestinians

A review of



Suicide in Palestine: Narratives of Despair

by Nadia Taysir Dabbagh

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Reviewed by
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— In today's world of nonstop global media coverage, it is virtually impossible to see the words *suicide* and *Palestine* in the same sentence without thinking immediately about suicide bombers and political uprisings. This book is *not* about suicide bombers; it is about personal acts of despair committed by young Palestinian men and women living in the West Bank in the period between the two intifadas—living, as the author puts it, with “the daily humiliation of life under military occupation” (p. 2). None of the case studies reviewed in this study had overt political motives. Yet paradoxically, this book's greatest contribution may well be to help us understand the social and interpersonal context in which suicide bombings occur.

— On the basis of the author's dissertation research, *Suicide in Palestine: Narratives of Despair* is a multidisciplinary study of the public health problem of suicide, the first in-depth study of suicidal behavior in the Arab world. It is an ambitious effort, combining an analysis of historical and religious context, a sociological study of suicide during an 18-month period in the late 1990s, and a review of 31 case studies, of which six male and six female cases are presented in depth. The author's goals are to understand the “suicide phenomenon”—a reported increase in suicides that occurred in Palestine in the late 1990s—and to hear “the voices of the powerless, the disappointed and the dispossessed” (p. vi). The book is somewhat uneven, but in the end it accomplishes both goals. It also provides a fascinating glimpse into gender roles and relationships in Palestinian culture.

— The author is the daughter of a Palestinian refugee; she grew up in the United Kingdom and visited her father's homeland for the first time at age 19. This insider-outsider status fuels the author's passion for her subject and her obvious respect for the people she interviews. Her awareness of political context underlies the book's most compelling point—that suicide in Palestine cannot be understood without examining cultural and political as well as individual factors. However, it also appears to make her overly cautious about drawing conclusions or expressing opinions, contributing to one of the greatest weaknesses of the book: the failure to pull together the strands of empirical evidence and social analysis into an explanatory framework.

Historical, Cultural, and Religious Context

— The first section of the book reviews historical and contemporary notions about suicide in Arab and Palestinian culture, in Islam, and in Christianity. Dabbagh covers a lot of ground in her attempt to educate the reader about a complex and largely misunderstood culture, and the result is at times a bit overwhelming. However, she makes two points that are critical to understanding the topic. First, she points out that although historically there were circumstances in which suicide was considered acceptable in Arab culture (e.g., in dire economic or social

circumstances), suicide is generally seen by Palestinians as a Western phenomenon, incongruent with the Palestinian self-image as freedom fighters who continue to struggle against all odds: "Suicide is about despair, about giving up, losing hope, which goes against everything that it means, at least in the popular psyche, to be Palestinian" (p. 81).

Second, Dabbagh corrects the wide misunderstanding that Islam encourages suicide. She cites both the Koran and the Hadith in condemning suicide as a grave sin, as life and death should remain in Allah's hands alone, and distinguishes suicide from martyrdom, the sacrifice of life in the service of Allah. This distinction is important, because many religions have recognized and celebrated martyrs—people willing to die for their beliefs—without glorifying the killing of self and others. Dabbagh is not a religious scholar, and her analysis may in some cases raise more questions than it answers—for example, she barely touches on the difference between the "inner" and the "outer" jihad—but she makes an important contribution by contextualizing her discussion of suicide in this way.

The Statistics of Suicide

In the second part of the book, Dabbagh reports on her research into reported suicides in Ramallah and Gaza following what was apparently a media-driven rise in public concern about suicide. In all societies, suicide is a socially constructed phenomenon, and Palestine turns out to be no exception. Dabbagh painstakingly describes how official public statistics are built from private sources, how social biases determine what is ultimately classified as a suicide-related event, and how the media can contribute to "moral panic" about behaviors that challenge cultural norms. She concludes that suicide rates in Palestine remain very low in contrast to other parts of the world, despite the existence of many risk factors. She also documents that suicide rates appear to decrease during wartime and rise during peacetime, consistent with findings elsewhere. Her primary conclusion—that the epidemiology of suicide in Palestine doesn't differ much from that in the West—is hardly headline news. Much of this discussion, particularly the detailed description of methodological problems, is of primarily academic interest.

Narratives of Despair

Dabbagh's work is most compelling in the last third of the book, when she recounts the "narratives of despair," stories of a dozen young Palestinians (six men and six women) who attempted suicide between 1997 and 1999. All six women reported feeling constrained by lack of options and controlled by others. Three had experienced physical and/or sexual abuse; it is interesting to note that all three had been abused by brothers. Their fathers and husbands were implicated as well, either by also being abusive or by being too weak to protect them. Several of the women were recently married, feeling powerless in their new households; others were divorced or childless. Their idioms of distress reflected being under pressure, confined, ready to explode. They coped by talking with friends or family or through prayer. In contrast, all of the men reported money problems. Four were unemployed (one of the four was disabled and unable to work), one had failed in plans to go to college, and one, although employed, didn't make enough money to maintain his reputation, which he believed had plummeted since the end of his participation in the intifada. For the men who were single, their financial status kept them from marrying; for those who were married, it reflected their failure as a husband. Their idioms of distress reflected defeat, depression, failure, and loss of pride or honor. None expressed strong religious beliefs; all smoked heavily and a few drank alcohol.

In telling these stories, Dabbagh opens a unique window to understanding life in the occupied territories. By organizing the analysis by gender, she provides a powerful tool for understanding the impact of gender roles and relationships in Palestinian society. The picture that emerges is of women entrapped by culturally defined gender roles and men by economic and political conditions.

The Politics of Suicide

Dabbagh's work demonstrates that suicide in Palestine is much like suicide anywhere in the world (Krug, Mercy, Zwi, & Loran, 2002). Women try to take

their lives more often than men, although men are more often successful. Suicide is seen as shameful, and many try to cover it up. Both men and women take their lives when they are powerless, depressed, and trapped by their circumstances.

However, despite the conceptual similarities, the suicides recounted in this book are different in one important way: They happened in Palestine. The author alludes to the importance she places on political context from the very beginning. The frontispiece of the book—maps showing the Palestinian and Jewish lands in 1946 (before partition), 1947, 1948-1967, and 1999—illustrates graphically how much the Palestinians have lost over the past 60 years. Dabbagh frequently frames the Palestinian experience in terms of oppression and, in fact, describes martyrdom as “a way in which marginalized or oppressed people can, in a sense, speak out” (p. 84). Unfortunately, although this may be the most important aspect of her work, Dabbagh never addresses this theme directly, choosing instead to let readers connect the dots.

When the dots are connected, there is a powerful message about suicide as a political tool. We know from the work of Robert Pape (2005), arguably the most knowledgeable person in America on the topic, that suicide-terrorist attacks are generally driven not by religion but by a clear political objective: to drive out occupying forces. Although the media and the public continue to link suicide bombing with Muslim fundamentalism, Pape's work argues convincingly that it is political rather than religious ideology that predicts the use of suicide terrorism. He contends that we should not be thinking about suicide terrorism from a “supply side,” acting as if there are a limited number of radical fundamentalists willing to kill and die for their beliefs who could, theoretically, be eliminated. Rather, we should be thinking about suicide terrorism as a “demand side” phenomenon, driven by the presence of foreign forces on territory perceived to be the homeland.

In this context, Dabbagh's work provides a fascinating lens on the psychological aspects of occupation by foreign forces. The case studies portray what could be seen as the underbelly of social unrest, conditions of personal despair that may well contribute directly to the “demand” described by Pape. Dabbagh suggests in a number of places that her male subjects reported that they were happier—or at least more fulfilled—during the intifada, and that the experience of political occupation affected both men and women. As she states in her conclusion, “The damaging effects of occupation, political violence and war are also illustrated by the narratives” (p. 237). Unfortunately, any such evidence is primarily inferential, as Dabbagh apparently did not address the subjects directly in her interviews. With a few exceptions, none of the material reported directly cites the political situation as contributing to the decision to commit suicide.

Nonetheless, it is a compelling argument. It is very possible that if Dabbagh had asked the question of her subjects more directly, she might have gotten a more direct answer. I hope next time she does. In the meantime, what is left unsaid in *Suicide in Palestine* may ultimately be more important than what is said.

References

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