

Martyrdom on Video:  
Testimonial Videos, Femininity, Islamism, and Palestinian Martyrdom in the Second Intifada

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several generations, “Palestinian nationalism was experienced as humiliation.”

In this study, I examine the frameworks through which the women's suicide bombing attacks were viewed at the time, and I seek to subvert the standard approaches to conceptualizing their acts. In common portrayals, the women's choices to commit suicide bombing attacks are most often understood in relation to either their feminine bodies and female identity, or their relationship to Islam. These two factors are frequently perceived as being the driving force behind the women's choices, and form the basis for analysis of their actions. However, throughout this study I argue that these frameworks are not entirely helpful. While many of the women did relate their acts to their femininity and Muslim identity, they did not do so in the ways that they were represented as having done. Rather, through their recorded video testimonials and violent suicide bombing attacks they consciously rejected such frameworks and instead centered their Palestinian nationalist identities in their choices to commit suicide bombing attacks. These women did not represent themselves in monolithic terms such as "female martyr", or "Muslim martyr"; rather, the thread running through every recorded testimonial is that of Palestinian nationalism, and therefore Palestinian martyrdom. This is not to say that each individual did not see themselves and their choice to die by suicide bombing as intimately connected to their femininity, their Muslim identity, or both, but that counter to dominant perceptions and narratives, these women all saw themselves as martyrs for Palestine, and expected to be accepted and celebrated by the community primarily as such.

In Chapter One, I analyze the frameworks through which these women suicide bombers were viewed in the aftermath of their attacks. Analyzing these externally imposed frameworks is important in exploring the martyrdom aspect of their suicide bombing acts, despite the fact that perceptions of their acts do not necessarily reflect the motivations or intentions of each suicide







language does not seek to invalidate the trauma, suffering and death these women have caused to their victims and the Israeli community as a whole.

The Second Intifada, as a facet of the Palestinian Israeli conflict, is a direct continuation of the modern conflict that began with the late nineteenth century Zionist movement.<sup>14</sup> The modern conflict pits two distinct groups with historical claims to the land against one another.<sup>15</sup> This study does not seek to validate one side, or invalidate the other, but focuses on the narratives of the Palestinian perspective, and therefore I use terminology more common to the Palestinian community when discussing female suicide bombing attacks.

Although the terminology of martyrdom has historical salience for a variety of other reasons which will be later discussed, the dichotomy of “martyrdom” vs. “suicide” is particularly important for suicide bombers who practice Islam, as all of the women I look at did.<sup>16</sup> The Qur’an’s denunciation of suicide has led to the questioning of Islamist commemoration and celebration of suicide bombers as martyrs.<sup>17</sup> Obeisance to the Qur’anic injunction against suicide is reflected in global statistics: despite the fact that Muslim countries, and Muslim people are associated with the largest plurality of suicide attacks around the globe, recorded suicide rates in Muslim countries are among the lowest in the world according to data collected by the World

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Smith, \_\_\_\_\_ . 9th edition. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s (2017): 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> Frances S. Hasso, “Discursive and Political Deployments by/of the 2002 Palestinian women suicide bombers/martyrs.” 81 (Nov 2005): 27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3874340>.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Gonzalez-Perez, “The False Islamization of Female Suicide Bombers.” 28 (April 2011): 52. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1007/s12147-011-9097-0>. The terms “Islamist” and “Islamism” are used throughout this thesis to avoid using the absolutist terms “Islam” and “Islamic”, to abstain from making totalizing assertions and assumptions about the religion as a whole. I do not use “Islamist” and “Islamism” to invoke recent negative connotations of fundamentalist terrorism that have become increasingly mainstream in the years since the 9/11 attacks.

Health Organization since 1950.<sup>18</sup> The global average rate of ordinary suicide in that period ranged from 11 to 15 per 100,000, while in Muslim countries such as Egypt, Syria and Iran have been below 1 per 100,000, and in Kuwait, Turkey and Bahrain below 5 per 100,000.<sup>19</sup> This suggests an understanding of suicide attacks as different from ‘ordinary suicide’ amongst Muslims, which has been debated and reconciled by Islamist theologians.

As Christopher Reuter discusses, interpretations of the Qur’an and the regarding questions of martyrdom have changed over time.<sup>20</sup> Theological debates continue to this day, but most Islamist scholars, and political leaders, have articulated suicide bombing as an intensification of battle-martyrdom.<sup>21</sup> Or, as articulated by Hamas official Abdelaziz al-Rantisi, “He who wants to kill himself because he’s sick of being alive—that’s suicide. But if someone wants to sacrifice his soul in order to defeat the enemy and for God’s sake—well, then he’s a martyr.”<sup>22</sup> Both Reuter and al-Rantisi are making the same point: that, essentially, the Qur’an and are living documents open to interpretation and re-interpretation, as is necessary for any religious or political document that remains relevant over centuries and millennia. In the same vein, however, such texts are also vulnerable to politically-motivated reinterpretations.<sup>23</sup>

“Suicide bombing attacks” is the most accurate, and widely used term to describe the acts these women performed—quite literally, committing suicide and violent bombing attacks at the

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Pape,

same time. However, different language has also been used by scholars to mean the same thing, including language such as “death acts,” “implosion,” and “suicide acts”. Throughout this study I have chosen to use “suicide bombing attacks,” almost exclusively, as it is both most accurate, and most evocative of the violence these women are voluntarily inflicting upon themselves and others.

In examining the women’s personal motivations to commit suicide bombing attacks, I use a combination of recorded video testimonies by the women themselves, and post-death testimonies from family members of the women. While I rely most heavily upon the testimonies themselves, given that they are the most direct representation of the women’s motivations, other sources of information are necessary where the women’s testimonials have been impossible to access in full or, as in the case of Wafa Idris, they did not record a video. Accessibility of the videos was an issue. Some videos are readily accessible in video form, or through transcripts and translations

presence of other people in the room and the amount of time between the video and the death act.<sup>24</sup> However, to attempt to infer differences between the women's stated motivations and desires and any other, non-articulated thoughts, is simply not possible, and would be inappropriate. Therefore, this study takes the testimonial videos at face value, as the stated desires of each of the women.

Appendix A, at the end of this study, showcases the collected transcripts in the most complete form that I believe exists within the extant literature on this subject. Transcriptions of the women's testimonials were collected from several sources, including Rosemarie Skaine's Frances S. Hasso's "Discursive and Political Deployments by/of the 2002 Palestinian women suicide bombers/martyrs," Mohammed M. Hafez's and V.G. Julie Rajan's

## **Literature Review**

This study relies on the previous work of many scholars, whose close analysis and study of the phenomenon of suicide bombing, the Second Palestinian intifada, martyrdom, and the eight women on whom I focus my study, has been integral.<sup>25</sup> This study owes much to the authors,

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potential of women as suicide bombers has only contributed to the deadliness of many of the attacks they have perpetrated.<sup>30</sup> Often termed “passing”, due to cultural presumptions about female lethality, as well as gendered clothing customs, suicide bombing women in many conflicts have been able to enter “enemy” spaces with less suspicion, allowing them to inflict more damage than a male counterpart could potentially have done.<sup>31</sup> While much of the historical information presented by Skaine, Victor, Berko and others who express these same assumptions has been helpful and valuable to this thesis, many of the assumptions and narratives presented therein need to be read very critically.

Many authors who have written on Palestinian women suicide bombers do afford them agency, while also giving measured discussion to the influences and processes that affected their decisions. These authors include Julie Rajan's , Doriit Namaan's “Brides of Palestine/Angels of Death: Media, Gender, and Performance in the Case of the Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers,” Jessica Davis'



, Rashid Khalidi's



martyrdom by arguing that Christians sought “heavenly victory” as compensation for earthly persecution, in particular in relation to Jesus Christ’s own earthly life, whereas Muslims did not suffer from earthly persecution, and rather took as a lesson from the life of Muhammad that they should actively “struggle against injustice and idolatry.”<sup>38</sup>

Such reasoning is in line with further concepts of Islamic martyrdom, which are intimately connection to the “active struggle” of a *shahid*, or martyr.<sup>39</sup> *shahid*, or the female *shahida*, is the Arabic word which means generically “witness,” but which appears once in the Qur’an as “martyr”, and has taken on that meaning in modern contexts.<sup>40</sup> Martyrdom narratives of active struggle are themselves connected to *jihad*, which is defined in the Qur’an as divinely sanctioned warfare, at the end of which either martyrdom or victory is promised.<sup>41</sup> The earthly reality of Islam’s territorial expansionism, as well as the belief of the *Ummah* (Muslim community) in divinely sanctioned *jihad* led to an overwhelming representation of battle martyrs among the ‘canon’ of early Muslim martyrs.<sup>42</sup> The most famous example of these was the battlefield death of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet, and son of Ali (the fourth and last of the ‘Rightly Guided Caliphs’ who succeeded Muhammad after his death), who was killed at the Battle of Karbala in 680.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Lewinstein, “The Revaluation of Martyrdom in Early Islam,” 80.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 80-83.

<sup>40</sup> Cook, *Islamic History*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>42</sup> Lewinstein, “The Revaluation of Martyrdom in Early Islam,” 86.


<sup>43</sup> Cook, *Islamic History*, 16-17.



promise exists for female martyrs, as they had not been imagined in the time of the Prophet or the collection of the .<sup>47</sup>

In the aftermath of Wafa Idris's suicide bombing attack, debates over the commemoration, celebration and martyrdom of Idris, and other potential future women bombers played out publicly among prominent Muslim leaders of Palestinian groups. Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the leader of Hamas, was at first adamantly against the participation of women in suicide bombing attacks.<sup>48</sup> He eventually amended his stance, first to state that women should not "be allowed to go out for jihad without a male chaperone," and then, in 2004, to sponsor Hamas' first female bomber, who was noticeably unaccompanied by a male companion.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, a prominent figure in the Lebanese Islamist group Hezbollah asserted that "Islam... permits women to take part if the necessities of defensive war dictate (it). We believe that the women who carry out suicide bombings are martyrs."<sup>50</sup> These debates, as they took place in the public sphere, though publicized pronouncements, helped to shape both popular narratives within Palestine as well as among Western observers around the women's motivations and desires, and their public martyrdom.<sup>51</sup> Claims or rejections of the women's martyrdom by

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holiest site in Judaism.<sup>67</sup> However, tensions had been escalating since 1995, when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated (by a radical Jewish student named Yigal Amir) for his support of the two-state solution, and his willingness to negotiate over territory with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).<sup>68</sup> In the wake of Rabin's assassination, the Oslo



Jerusalem at rush hour immediately before the Sabbath, and detonated a belt of explosives, killing herself, a seventeen-year-old Israeli girl by the name of Rachel Levy, an Israeli security guard, and injuring 28 other people.<sup>77</sup> Andaleeb Takatkeh was the fourth Palestinian woman to commit a suicide attack in 2002. Her attack came on April 12th at a bus stop in the Mahane Yehuda market in West Jerusalem, she killed seven people (including herself), and injured another 104.<sup>78</sup>

Although 2002 was the deadliest year of the intifada in terms of suicide attacks, Palestinian women continued to commit attacks until the end of the intifada; in 2003 Hiba Daraghmeh, a 19 year old law student, killed three and injured between 52 and 83 people on May 18th, 2002.<sup>79</sup> Later in 2003, 29-year-old Hanadi Jaradat killed 19 and injured another 50 in a restaurant in Haifa, Israel.

bombers have acted as “lone wolves”. However, the following chapter of this study concerns itself only with the eight women who committed violent suicide between 2002 and 2004, in the context of the intifada.

## CHAPTER TWO: Palestinian Martyrs on Video

### ‘Martyrdom Videos’

As seen in Chapter One, the most prevalent frameworks through which the Palestinian suicide bombing women were perceived and understood were in relation to the religion of Islam, and in relation to their female bodies. While it is clear that one or both of these lenses were salient for most of the women, these lenses can not in and of themselves accurately describe the desires and experiences of these women. In this section, I study the individual transcripts to better understand these women’s individual motivations to commit suicide attacks. I also examine interviews with family after the women’s deaths to understand context that was not provided in the testimonial video. Due to the constricting length of this project, I examine in detail the cases of only four women in this section—Wafa Idris, Dareen Abu Aisheh, Ayat al-Akhras, and Hanadi Jaradat.

Before her suicide attack, Wafa Idris worked with the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, which is part of the International Red Cross. During this work, she cared for many Palestinians

had experienced a traumatic event within her personal life, as her husband had divorced her, at least in part for her failure to conceive a child, and had subsequently remarried.<sup>84</sup>

Dareen Abu Aisheh, the second female Palestinian bomber and first to record a testimonial video before her death, committed her suicide bombing attack on February 27th, 2002. Her testimonial is the lengthiest of all collected, and provides context to all three frameworks of martyrdom to be examined. Aisheh was an English student at Najah University in Nablus, and had been recognized for her academic excellence.<sup>85</sup> Leading up to her suicide attack, her 17-year old cousin died completing his own suicide mission in Tel Aviv, and she witnessed a fatal shooting at an Israeli checkpoint only two days before her own death.<sup>86</sup> Her family recalled her discussion of suicide bombing before her death, noting that once, in response to an uncle's protestations about killing civilians in suicide bombings, Aisheh said "Do you feel like a human...when the Israelis control your every move? Do you believe we have a future? If I'm going to die at their hands anyway, why shouldn't I take some of them with me?"<sup>87</sup>

Ayat al-Akhras' testimonial is brief, shaming Arab leaders and armies, and emphasizing the glory of God for her actions. al-Akhras was the youngest of the female suicide bombers, and a student in high school who had planned to go to Bethlehem University in fall 2002.<sup>88</sup> Only three years old at the 1987 outbreak of the First Intifada, much of al-Akhras' life was defined by

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<sup>84</sup> Rajan, 235.

<sup>85</sup> VanderKaay, "Girls Interrupted," 14-15.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Dareen Abu Aisheh, quoted in *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.







words. In many ways, notions of Islamist martyrdom are tied up in Palestinian nationalist discourses of bombing, as is evident throughout the testimonials, and as will be explored in the next section. Many of the women's testimonies accept some of the traditional ideas about Islamist martyrdom that were explored in Chapter One. For example, Hanadi Jaradat opened her



Aisheh's implicit connections between her female bodies' ability to give birth to "an army of living martyrs," and her choice to instead use it as "a human bomb" reject frameworks of gender-logic that centre women's biological reproductive capabilities. Reem al-Riyashi was the only woman Palestinian suicide bomber who already had children at the time of her suicide. al-Riyashi speaks of her children in her testimonial, saying that she "love(s) them very much" and that she is "sure that God will take care of them if I become a martyr."<sup>99</sup> al-Riyashi's essential rejection of motherhood in favour of martyrdom also disrupts gendered frameworks of thought. Rather than behave as a mother, she expresses—and achieves—her desire that "the shredded limbs of my body would be shrapnel, tearing Zionists to pieces, knocking on heaven's door with the skulls of Zionists."<sup>100</sup>

Ayat al-Akhras also implicates her femininity into her testimonial video, albeit in a different way than Aisheh and al-Riyashi. Rather than emphasize the biological potential of her female body, she emphasizes her youth, in order to shame and emasculate "the Arab armies who are sitting and watching the girls of Palestine fighting while they are asleep."<sup>101</sup> In doing so, al-Akhras centres and weaponizes both her youth (she was 17 when she died) and her femininity against both Israeli and complicit Arab states. Analyzed in conjunction with al-Riyashi and Aisheh's testimonials, al-Akhras is demonstrating the end point and the product of a woman's

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<sup>99</sup> Reem al-Riyashi, "Video Testimony, 14 January 2004," accessed in McFarland & Company: North Carolina, (2006): 130 by Rosemarie Skaine, and Palestinian Media Watch "Female suicide terrorist Reem Riyashi in farewell video: Zionists are "enemies of my religion...How often I desired to carry out a Martyrdom-seeking operation." (Jan 14, 2004). <https://palwatch.org/page/351>.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ayat al-Akhras, "Video Testimony, 29 March 2002."



of Palestinian women's involvement in suicide bombing attacks. Jacoby asks: "what space is available for the diversity of women's agency within feminisms that originate in occupation, national liberation and militarized conflict?"<sup>104</sup> This question resonates particularly within the context of the women suicide bombers, as the women are totalized by others around their femininity and their relationship to Islam, and are not given agency in discussions after their deaths to assert their own self-asserted motivations of Palestinian nationalism.

Julie Rajan argues that the recasting of Palestinian women suicide bombers as "proper women...who ascribed to proper social behaviours,... and fulfill traditional female social roles such as wife, mother, and daughter" was linked to male apprehensions and anxieties about feminine agency expressed in violent ways.<sup>105</sup> As Rajan notes, this was done by Palestinians and Arabs, in spite of the women's own statements, because of way that the agency and desires expressed by these women challenged the preconceived traditional masculine-centered ideas of Palestinian nationalism.<sup>106</sup> Discussions of Palestinian nationalism as masculine stem from both Palestinian and Western Orientalist assumptions about nationhood. Palestinian masculine nationalism emerged from the decades of oppression Palestinian people faced in the wake of the 1948 declaration of the state of Israel, and the Naqba. Amireh describes this as a "brand of nationalism, where men bear arms and women bear children," which is "openly advocated by the Islamic movement in Palestine."<sup>107</sup> Islamist ideas about suicide bombing women have been

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<sup>104</sup> Tami Amanda Jacoby, "Feminism, nationalism, and difference: Reflections on the Palestinian women's movement," *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 22, no. 5 (1999): 512. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395\(99\)00056-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(99)00056-4).

<sup>105</sup> Rajan, 224.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Amireh, "Between Complicity and Subversion," 757.







preconceptions. Together, both the Palestinian and Western understandings of masculine nationalism help to explain why Palestinian nationalism was never accepted or advanced as a central framework to explain the suicide bombing attacks of the women.

In fact, female expressions of Palestinian nationalism have been present for over a century.<sup>118</sup> Middle Eastern feminist theory seeks to challenge “the hegemony of Western agendas by rejecting the construction of women as a unitary, global category with uniform interests.”<sup>119</sup> By embracing nationalism as an emancipatory framework, Middle Eastern feminists have consolidated around “the politicization of women in anti colonial and national liberation movements.”<sup>120</sup> One must be clear that during the First Palestinian Intifada, women fully joined within organizational structures, and sought to advance both Palestinian nationalism, as well as women’s position within Palestinian nationalistic movements and structures.<sup>121</sup> The nationalistic sentiments and organizational power displayed by women during the First Intifada managed to

## **Palestinian Martyrs**

Expressions of Palestinian nationalism are present within the recorded video testimonials of the suicide bombing women of the Second Intifada. Of all three frameworks examined throughout this study, it is the only one that is present in every collected video testimonial. Given the brief script of most of the testimonials, our discussion of the explicit centering of Palestinian nationalism returns us to many of the same phrases used in the previous sections. Palestinian nationalism is expressed through denunciations and shaming of non-Palestinian Arab leaders, who have failed to defend Palestinians from occupation and suffering at the hands of the Israeli government.<sup>123</sup> It is expressed most frequently using the language of Zionism in derogatory terms, as women clearly frame their actions as being first and foremost to hurt and kill Zionists. Daren Abu Aisheh's testimonial, for example, promises "to give of myself in the path of God to be the bombs that scorch the Zionists" and that "the role of the Palestinian woman will no longer be limited to grieving... we will transform our bodies into human bombs that spread here and there to demolish the illusion of security for the Israeli people."<sup>124</sup> Throughout, both God and Aisheh's femininity are called upon, but only as complements to her identity as Palestinian, and to her hatred of Zionists.

Hanadi Jaradat and Reem al-Riyashi's testimonials are similar in their composition. Jaradat exclaims that "In His (God's) greatness, I decided to be the sixth female martyr who would turn her body into shrapnel to pierce the hearts of each Zionist colonialist in my country, and every settler or Zionist who has tried to sow death in my country."<sup>125</sup> Similar to Aisheh's testimonial,

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<sup>123</sup> Ayat al-Akhras, "Video Testimony, 29 March 2002."

<sup>124</sup> Daren Abu Aisheh, "Video Testimony, 27 February 2002."

<sup>125</sup> Hanadi Jaradat, "Video Testimony, 18 May 2002."

Jaradat ties religion and her femininity, as well as the line of female bombers before her, into her narrative before centering it on her ultimate goal. Jaradat's testimonial is the most frank of all the women—it explicitly rejects the Israeli state as a colonialist imposition, and calls the land “my country,” showing the Palestinian nationalist motivations that drove her to commit violent suicide.<sup>126</sup> al-Riyashi, the only mother to commit a suicide bombing attack during the intifada, does the same when she claims that-

Zionists, they are directed against other Arab leaders and armies that have failed to help Palestinians achieve a national homeland.<sup>131</sup>

Several of the families of the women also identified Palestinian nationalism as the driving force behind their suicide acts. Wafa Idris' mother said of her: "She was a Muslim, which made her fearless, but it was the injustice of the Jews that made her act."<sup>132</sup> An aunt described her as "a

expressed through hatred of Zionists, as a driving force behind their loved ones' decisions to become suicide bombers.

## **CONCLUSION**

The martyrdom of Wafa Idris, Andaleeb Takatkeh, Dareen Abu Aisheh and the other Palestinian women who committed suicide bombing attacks during the Second Palestinian

of femininity, as well as anxieties about Muslim-sponsored terrorism onto discussions about the women's motivations.

However, as evidenced in the women's recorded video testimonials, as well as interviews with family and friends in the wake of their suicide attacks, the women were intimately motivated by Palestinian nationalist desires. Removing Palestinian nationalism as a legitimate framework for their actions has diminished the agency of the women themselves in narratives about their own death and martyrdom. Throughout this study, which has aimed at centering the words of the women themselves, it has become clear that the eight Palestinian women who became suicide bombers during the Second Palestinian Intifada fought against intersections of colonized histories, gendered subjugations, and religious assumptions of their role in the nation in order to present themselves as Palestinian nationalists in their final acts.

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## APPENDIX A

## Transcribed Testimonials of Suicide Bombers

27/02/ Dareen Abu al-Aqsa “In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, Most Merciful,  
2002 Aisheh Martyrs  
Brigade Blessings and peace upon the leader of the holy fighters, our Prophet Muhammad, God’s blessing and peace upon him:

The Almighty Says: So their Lord accepted their prayer, saying: I will not suffer the work of any worker among you to be lost whether male or female, the one of you being from the other. So those who fled and were driven forth from their homes and persecuted in My way and who fought and were slain, I shall truly remove their evil and make them enter the Gardens wherein flow rivers—a reward from Allah. And with Allah is the best reward.

Because the role of the Muslim Palestinian woman is no less important than the role of our fighting brothers, I have decided to be the second female martyr to continue in the path that was forged by the female martyr Wafa al-Idris. I give my humble self in the path of God to avenge the limbs of our martyred brothers and in revenge for the sanctity of our religion and mosques, and in revenge for the sanctity of the al-Aqsa mosque and all of God’s places of worship which have been turned into [alcohol] bars in which all that has been forbidden by God is pursued in order to spite our religion and to insult the message of our Prophet.

Because the body and soul are the only things we possess, I give of myself in the path of God to be the bombs that scorch the Zionists, and destroy the myth of God’s chosen people. Because the Muslim Palestinian woman was and continues to take the lead in the procession of jihad against injustice, I call upon my sisters to continue on this path, for this is the path of all those who are free and honourable.

29/03/2002 Ayat al-Akhras al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade “I, living martyr Ayat al-Akhras execute my mission purely for the sake of God. To the Arab rulers I say enough sleeping, betrayal, and failure to fulfill Palestine’s duty. Shame on the Arab armies who are sitting and watching the girls of Palestine fighting while they are asleep.

Let this be intifada until victory!”

12/04/  
2002

