20 of 42 DOCUMENTS

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QUICK-THINKING POLICE THWART SUICIDE BOMBER; ISRAEL: PALESTINIAN PREVENTED FROM DETONATING EXPLOSIVE

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POLICE leaped on a Palestinian suicide bomber yesterday and grabbed a bag packed with explosives and nails from him just as he tried to detonate it in a busy Israeli town.

If they had acted a split second later the police and people near them in Afula, northern Israel, would have been blown up.

The town was sealed off and police asked residents to remain indoors while security forces searched for the bomber's accomplice.

The incident began when a bag believed to be full of explosives was discovered in a town centre bank.

When police arrived, a man was seen fleeing the scene with another bag.

As police gave chase, he tried to set it off with a switch he was holding, said spokesman Yossi Hasson.

Officers managed to jump on the suspect, grab the explosive from him and prevent it from going off, Hasson said.

The original bag found in the bank did not contain explosives, police said. Israeli police have been on high alert for bombings in light of 10 months of clashes with the Palestinians.

Twenty-one Israelis were killed last month when a bomber exploded himself in a line of people outside a Tel Aviv disco.

The incident yesterday began when three detectives in an unmarked car noticed a man acting suspiciously, police spokesman Yaron Zamir said.

When one of the policemen yelled at the suspect, he began running. The three detectives jumped on the man and threw him to the ground as he pressed a switch in his hand, apparently trying to detonate the bag.

After the policemen wrestled the bag from the man's hands, they noticed an electric wire with a detonator coming out of one side of it, Zamir said.

Sappers who were called to the scene later safely detonated a pipe bomb that contained nails and screws, for greater deadliness.