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## Recognizing Imminent Danger: Characteristics of a Suicide Bomber

EMSWORLD

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The signs are everywhere. Posters and public announcements warn to keep a watchful eye for suspicious people—those who might endanger lives by committing an unspeakable act of terrorism. There is one problem, however. These announcements and posters do not begin to describe the characteristics of a “suspicious person.”

Nearly everyone has, at one time or another, behaved strangely and, if the signs are taken literally, they could be pointing to just about any of us at any given time. Taking this at face value, the entire populace could become paranoid, reporting even the most miniscule deviation from the norm! While

stopping short of that, EMS providers should nevertheless be aware of the characteristics of those individuals who could pose a threat to health and safety—especially the suicide bomber.

Often stationed at high-profile events where hundreds or thousands of people gather, EMTs and paramedics will wander through the crowd looking for anyone having medical difficulties. Because of that, you may be in a position to identify a suspicious person who intends to detonate him or herself—but only if you know what you’re looking for. Armed with specific information about potential terrorists, EMS providers could enhance surveillance, recognize an imminent hazard and take steps to report a suspected individual to law enforcement. Be assured, this is not a profile of any ethnic or religious group—suicide bombers can come from nearly every cultural background.

### General Characteristics

Perhaps because of this country’s lack of direct experience with suicide bombings, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has released a statement claiming there is “no specific profile for those who have engaged in suicide/homicide bombings.”<sup>1</sup>



In contrast, Israel, which has experienced over 300 such bombings since 1993, with 242 of them occurring since 2000, has developed some guidelines and profiles that highlight the general characteristics of a suicide bomber.<sup>2,3</sup> These include:

- 32% have at least a high school education and more than 25% have some college background.
- Suicide bombers participate in months of indoctrination training. When ready for the mission, they are in a "hypnotic state" believing that the mission will open heaven's gates.
- A majority of suicide/homicide bombers are unmarried. Some have spouses and children.
- Most are male between 17–23 years of age; however, women, children and older men have been recruited for suicide bombing missions.

The first known suicide bombing by a woman (January 2002) was carried out by Wafa Idris, a 27-year-old divorcee who volunteered as a paramedic. More recently, Reem Raiyshi, a 22-year-old mother of two, perpetrated an attack at a border crossing between Israel and the Gaza strip. The media have reported recent attacks by Chechen rebels, whose suicide bombings have mostly been carried out by women. It is generally believed that the Chechen women were not acting on religious fanaticism, but rather avenging the deaths of friends or relatives in the conflict with Russia.<sup>4</sup>

Approximately a quarter of suicide bombers are between 24–48 years old. There are also reports of attacks carried out by children and by older individuals, although exact numbers are uncertain.



#### General Demeanor

Certain behavioral characteristics of a suicide bomber have been identified.<sup>4,5</sup> These include:

- The appearance of being nervous. They may seem preoccupied or have a blank stare.
- Focused intent and vigilance. Such an acute focus may result in no response to verbal or other contact.
- An awkward attempt to blend in. Behavior will seem odd or overtly out of place.
- Avoidance behaviors toward authority. If security is present, suicide bomber tries to be inconspicuous.
- May be praying fervently to him/herself. This gives

the appearance of talking or whispering to someone. Keep in mind that many people talk to themselves, thus this behavior in and of itself has little meaning. Further, either of these behaviors could be confused with speaking on a cell phone headset.

- Behavior may be consistent with that of a person without any future. For example, giving away things of value, buying a one-way ticket, or being unconcerned about receiving change for a purchase. In addition:
  - Profuse sweating that is out of synch with weather conditions.
  - Walking deliberately toward a specific object or target, often pushing their way through a crowd or around barriers. May show a high degree of focus or intent, especially if the target is in sight.
  - Lack of mobility of the lower torso may cause upper body stiffness. This is due to the bomb device that is strapped to the body. The increased use of backpacks may reduce or eliminate this element.
  - In order to disguise the appearance, a beard may have been recently shaved or the hair cut short. There is a noticeable difference in the skin color of the recently shaved area.
  - To smell better when going to paradise, the suicide bomber may use herbal- or floral-scented water.

#### General Appearance

As the event draws near, the suicide bomber needs to prepare to deliver the device. There are certain clues in appearance, such as clothing, that could foretell of an impending attack. The suspect might be purchasing, wearing or carrying such items as:

- Clothing that does not match the weather. For example, wearing a heavy coat on a warm day.
- Clothing that is excessively loose, giving the appearance that the head is out of proportion with the body. The loose clothing is used to conceal explosives worn close to the body.
- The suicide bomber may carry a backpack, bag, briefcase or luggage.
- The detonating switch is often held in a clenched fist. Backup devices might also be used, including a timer, pager, cellular phone or booby-trap switch. An accomplice or supervisor can remotely detonate the bomb if the attacker is detained or killed, or if the attack is otherwise aborted.
- The appearance of excessive weight. Many bombs will be packed with shrapnel such as ball bearings, nuts, bolts, screws, nails or other small metal objects that are dispersed into the crowd upon detonation. These comprise the bomber's primary "kill" mechanism.

**Role of EMS**

The most likely scenario will be one in which EMTs and paramedics respond after the explosion has occurred, rendering aid to the blast survivors. However, on occasion, EMS providers may find themselves in a crowded environment with the opportunity to identify a potential suicide bomber. If one is identified or strongly suspected, EMS providers should not attempt to intervene. Rather, clear the area of bystanders and request a response from law enforcement. If evacuation is not an option, get safe behind a solid wall or fixed barrier and remain there until the "all clear" has been given. Remember that even if the suicide bomber is arrested or subdued, an alternate trigger or an accomplice may be in place to detonate the device and complete the mission.

**Summary**

By all reports, the public is at increasing risk of attack by terrorist organizations. Citizens have been asked to increase their vigilance and report suspicious individuals to reduce the chance of a suicide or homicide bombing. Terrorist groups often target their actions to inflict the most casualties and may choose mass gatherings to detonate an explosive device. Since EMS providers are frequently assigned to work special details where large numbers of people may gather, EMTs and paramedics can assist law enforcement in identifying individuals who may pose a threat to the people gathered at the event. The characteristics of suicide bombers discussed here are meant to increase your awareness level to recognize a potential problem. The astute EMS provider can then notify appropriate law enforcement personnel for further investigation and action.

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