

Suicide in Palestine: Narratives of Despair

Nadia Taysir Dabbagh

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Within the context of Islamic thought, suicide has met both tolerance and resistance and has spawned two cultural categories: suicide and martyrdom. Nadia Taysir Dabbagh approaches the issue with a dexterity honed by medical experience, and her insightful analysis of the two concepts reveals that suicide is perceived as a private act condemned by society and religion, while martyrdom is a public act exalted for the greater good. The fusion of theories plucked from psychiatry, anthropology, and psychology and then coupled with compelling case studies conducted in Ramallah and Gaza creates a coverage that treads the line between objective analysis and morbid fascination, as her research contributes a reasoned account of a startling trend largely lost in a region immersed in its tumultuous past and present and uncertain future.

This book is the product of an intercalated M.B.–Ph.D. program submitted to the Psychiatry Department at University College London. The introductory chapter incorporates an elucidated methodology that identifies biological, social, and psychological study approaches, with the primary system of analysis resting on the latter. This person-centred technique perceives suicide as an individual phenomenon linked to risk factors (e.g., depression, anxiety, and stressful life events) and associations. Likewise, the social approach favors a broader angle and associates suicide with such social conditions as unemployment, domestic violence, and sociopolitical protest. The biological approach draws a correlation between affective disorders, such as bipolar disorder, and suicide. Eminent suicidologists, such as Michael Kral, Silvia S. Canetto, and David Lester, who assert that suicidal behavior should be placed in its cultural as well as social context, provide the publication's theoretical foundation.

Chapter 3, "Death and Self-Killing in Arab Thought: Suicide and Martyrdom," traces perceptions of suicide from pre-Islamic times to the feuds and honor killings of the present day. Dabbagh portrays the evolution of suicide

from an honorable act conducted in dire economic or social circumstances through starvation (*al-itifād*) and alcohol consumption (*shirib khamrā*) to a grave sin (*kabirah*) in the early centuries of Islam, when Qur'anic commentators employed Qur'anic texts to justify its condemnation. One interpretation contends that "Since Muslims are owned by God (his slaves) ... they have no right over their lives. Suicide can thus be seen as stealing from Him" (p. 25). It is regrettable that this detail is concealed in a footnote, for questions surrounding suicide's progress from toleration to *kabirah* and the reason for this shift remain unanswered, revealing a tangible gap.

Despite this omission, the denunciation of suicide has impacted research on fatal and near-fatal suicide attempts in the Occupied Territories. In chapter 5, "Social Construction of Palestinian Suicide Statistics," she provides a vivid narrative of the disarray and ambiguities that thwarted her efforts to formulate a comprehensive statistical analysis. Whether it is in the friendly but shambolic Ramallah police station or the equally accommodating hospital, she states: "When I asked to go to the Old Archive everyone laughed and said that no one goes there. I was even told there were rats" (p. 107).

Although the reluctance to specify suicide as the diagnosis rendered the results ambiguous, this is not something new. In 1964, Erwin Stengel noted in *Suicide and Attempted Suicide* that "... there are other factors which tend to falsify the suicide rates. In Roman Catholic and Moslem countries a verdict of suicide is such a disgrace for the deceased and his family that it is avoided wherever possible. This is why the very low suicide rates of the Republic of Ireland and Egypt are suspect" (Penguin: 1964, p. 19). In her quest for data, Dabbagh endured numerous setbacks for information that may (or may not) reflect the circumstances. Yet her perseverance to salvage results makes *Suicide in Palestine* a valuable addition to this area of study.

"Female Cases" and "Male Cases," which comprise chapters 6 and 7, respectively, ascertain the impetus for suicide. For women, marriage, motherhood, and divorce feature heavily, supported by poignant accounts of victimization and disconsolation. Men experience great pressure from society and even themselves to fulfill their attributed role as "Man-the-Impregnator-Protector-Provider" (p. 181). A major source of despondency arrived with the end of the intifada, which had provided a majority of men a time of camaraderie, employment, and a common objective. For Kareem, a 40-year-old married man who attempted suicide in August 1998 through an overdose, the Israeli presence allowed him to move with greater ease and seek employment. The Palestinian National Authority's accession and the corruption rife thereafter restricted his life, and thoughts of suicide soon followed

(pp. 190-94). Even those too young to participate in the struggle reminisce with ardent longing that “he would have preferred a prison life sentence like his brother. He said this would have been more ‘honourable’ than the lonely suffering he dealt with every day” (p. 190).

That the male cases are often overlooked in comparison to their female counterparts prompts Dabbagh to the significant conclusion that the concept of “Man-the-Impregnator-Protector-Provider” inflicts demanding social duties and responsibilities, since all of the male respondents longed to fulfill this role. Their inability to do so compounded a belief that they had failed to become social adult males.

Change, then, must not come only from within the troubled respondents, for as Dabbagh emphasizes: “If you are living in an atmosphere of daily death and killing, causing your own death may not seem such an extreme action” (p. 236). By way of conclusion, the author recommends that educational opportunities be increased; mental illness be destigmatized through a series of awareness programs held at women’s groups and youth organizations; nurses should receive psychiatric assessment training to enhance their understanding of the patient’s needs; unemployment, estimated at 50 percent in 2003, must be reduced; and, on a wider level, the security wall must be dismantled, as it promotes ghettos of deprivation that will further increase Palestinian suffering (pp. 243-45).

The recommendations are *bona fide*, but the practicality of actually implementing them in an environment acknowledged as corrupt is severely challenged. Nevertheless, Dabbagh’s fascinating style, edifying appendices that provide a lucid table-based analysis of the case studies, and extensive bibliography encompassing works from the medical, anthropological, and political realms, render *Suicide in Palestine* a worthy contribution to understanding suicide in the Islamic world.

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