

Aftermath

In Jerusalem cleaning up after a suicide bombing is business as usual

by [Bruce Hoffman](#)

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Jerusalem became the suicide-terrorism capital of the world on March 17, 2002, when a suicide bomber blew himself up next to a city bus, wounding twenty people and killing himself. With this attack—the twenty-fourth by suicide bombers in the city, according to the comprehensive terrorist incident database maintained by Haifa University's National Security Studies Center—the number of incidents recorded in Jerusalem surpassed that in Colombo, Sri Lanka, the scene of frequent Tamil Tiger attacks during the 1990s. As of this writing Jerusalem had suffered thirty-seven suicide attacks, which had killed 242 people and injured 1,631 others—and the city is very likely to remain the top target for suicide terrorism in the foreseeable future. The trauma inflicted by such attacks is impossible to avoid or overestimate, but the city has developed a remarkable ability to quickly restore a semblance of order and dignity.

"This city has it down to a science," a policeman in Jerusalem told me recently. It was 1:30 in the morning, and we were watching a street sweeper, brushes spinning and water spraying, maneuvering along Emek Refaim—the aptly named "Valley of the Ghosts," which is the main thoroughfare of the city's upscale German Colony neighborhood. Less than two hours before, a suicide bomber had blown himself up just inside a packed café there, killing seven and wounding more than fifty.

As frequently happens, the bomber had been unable to get to his primary target, which appears to have been the pizza restaurant next door. A security guard at the entrance refused to admit him, so he simply moved on to the next storefront. Here, too, a security guard attempted to prevent him from entering, but unsuccessfully; the bomber forced his way into the café and detonated his bomb, which he had concealed in a belt beneath his shirt. The force of the blast shattered the café's floor-to-ceiling plate-glass windows and created a torrent of lethal shrapnel, augmented by thousands of tiny ball bearings packed in canvas pouches that were sewn onto the bomber's belt.

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The first call for help was probably made to 101, the emergency telephone number of the Magen David Adom, Israel's version of the Red Cross, which is responsible for the country's medical-response teams and ambulances. In the event of such calls MDA dispatchers follow a strict procedure. First they alert the ambulance teams, who are summoned by pager. Then, by both radio and pager, they notify the MDA's national headquarters, in Tel Aviv; the police (Israel has a national police force, not individual local forces); and neighboring MDA regions and hospitals. Listening in on these alerts, or receiving notification on their

paggers, are the devoutly religious members of ZAKA, a nongovernmental organization whose complete name means "Identification of Disaster Victims" and whose self-proclaimed purpose is to "rescue, save, and be part of the spiritual justice of truth"—that is, to deal with the tiny bits of bone, tissue, teeth, fingernails, and toenails scattered across the pavement and splattered against nearby cars, windows, walls, lampposts, commercial advertisements, and municipal signs.

The police or the MDA crews arrive first, depending on who is closer to the scene when the call comes in. The top priority is to tend to the victims and, simultaneously, to secure the area—to make sure that no other attacker strikes just as medical teams and more police officers arrive, among them counterterrorist, forensics, bomb-disposal, and intelligence squads. For the MDA the highest priority is to follow what Dr. Shmuel Shapira, the deputy director general of Jerusalem's Hadassah Hospitals, calls the "golden ten-minute rule": Get to victims during the critical minutes after an attack, when prompt medical attention—maintaining airways, controlling external hemorrhages—can mean the difference between life and death. Suicide bombings, Shapira notes, are among the most lethal of all terrorist attacks. Ninety percent of those killed in a suicide bombing die at the scene. Most of the survivors are only lightly wounded—and, indeed, more than half of them are discharged from the hospital within twenty-four hours of admittance.

Dead bodies are taken by ambulance to the state mortuary and forensics laboratory at Abu Kabir, in central Israel. In most other countries the dead generally cannot be removed from a crime scene until a preliminary murder investigation is completed; in Israel, however, those killed in suicide attacks are taken away immediately. This is done out of respect for Jewish law (which, insofar as possible, requires burial within twenty-four hours of death), and is a means of ensuring prompt identification of the victims, so that their families can be notified. Removing bodies from the scene also means fewer pictures of corpses or body bags on the news, so the attackers are denied some of the fear and imagery of death that they seek to disseminate.

The ambulances that carry dead bodies to the forensics laboratory often carry nylon bags containing body parts collected at the attack scene. A macabre puzzle may confront the forensics unit as it tries to make an accurate count of the victims: which arm or leg belongs to which limbless corpse?

Back at the attack site witnesses are whisked away by the police so that they can be thoroughly debriefed. Police forensics personnel at the same time begin the task of gathering evidence. Clad in white coveralls, bright yellow overshoes, and latex gloves, they comb gutters, sidewalks, windows, walls, and doorways for evidentiary fragments. Colleagues wheeling large magnetic rollers traverse the area, collecting bits of shrapnel and other bomb parts. By this stage ZAKA personnel are usually arguing with the authorities to be allowed to begin their own work.

Finally, within hours, the city's sanitation workers arrive, armed with brooms, brushes, hoses, and street-sweeping vehicles. Ironically, many of the sanitation workers are Palestinians, residents of Arab East Jerusalem who are employed by the municipality. When they receive the signal from the police commander at the scene, they set to work—and soon shattered windows are boarded or taped up, broken glass, masonry, and other debris are swept up, and gutters and sidewalks are scrubbed. Throughout the following day windows and doors in nearby buildings are replaced, the last traces of bloodshed are removed, and the appearance of order is quickly restored—except, of course, at the site of the attack itself.