

Suicide bombers: psychopaths or not?



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Psychopath or not? Are suicide bombers crazy? Do you think their way of thinking is rational? At first, the answer anyone would give seems obvious: they must be crazy and have irrational thoughts to blow themselves up and kill innocent people in the process. However, terrorism experts have proposed several rational motives for their actions. Some political scientists believe that terrorists make a tactical choice to use suicide bombings against a stronger enemy. Other experts argue that suicide terrorism is part of a “cycle of humiliation” fueled by a suicide bombers’ desire to strike back at those who have mistreated or shamed them.

Some psychologists have concluded that suicide bombers are ordinary, everyday people who are unlikely to commit violent acts until they identify with and join a terrorist group which manipulates and pressures them to commit these violent acts. Suicide bombing attacks have become a weapon of choice among terrorist groups because of their lethality and ability to cause mayhem and fear. Though depressing, the almost daily news reports of deaths caused by suicide attacks rarely explain what motivates the attackers.

Between 1981 and 2006, 1200 suicide attacks constituted 4 percent of all terrorist attacks in the world and killed 14, 599 people or 32 percent of all terrorism related deaths. The question is why? Between 1981 and 2006, 1200 suicide attacks constituted 4 percent of all terrorist attacks in the world and killed 14, 599 people or 32 percent of all terrorism related deaths. (figure 1) Despite everyone’s stereotype belief that suicide bombers “ are both sociopathic and irrational people, many political scientists believe that most terrorists are rational people with tactical goals.

Evans (a political scientist), for example, argues that terrorism is a strategy. Those who use it want to expose their cause, draw the enemy into a costly conflict, and provoke an overreaction that will make the enemy look foolish or evil, recruit supporters, and prevent finding the middle ground. Robert Pape also believes that suicide terrorism has an essential strategic logic. It is politics more than religious passion that has led terrorists to blow themselves up.

In Roberts view, “ Suicide-terrorist attacks are not encouraged by religion but more as a clear strategic objective: to force modern democracies to remove military forces from the territory that the terrorists view as their homeland. ” While terrorism can be seen as a rational strategy, feelings of shame and embarrassment may make suicide the weapon of choice because they can get their revenge as well as just end their miserable life, Interviews of failed bombers or bombers-in-training reveal that they are striking back at those who humiliated or injured them.

On October 4, 2003, 29 year old Palestinian lawyer Hanadi Jaradat exploded her suicide belt in the Maxim restaurant in Haifa killing 20 people and wounding many more. According to herfamily, her suicide mission was in revenge for the killing of her brother and her fiance by the Israeli security forces and in revenge for all the crimes Israel had perpetrated in the West Bank by killing Palestinians and confiscating their lands. The main motive for many suicide bombings in Israel is revenge for acts committed by Israelis. The bombers want to send a message: their enemies are responsible for their humiliation and ultimately for their death.

In September 2007 when American forces raided an Iraqi insurgent camp in the desert town of Singar near the Syrian border they discovered biographies of more than seven hundred foreign fighters. The Americans were surprised to find that 137 were Libyans and 52 of them were from a small Libyan town of Darnah. The reason why so many of Darnah's young men had gone to Iraq for suicide missions was not the global jihadi ideology, but an explosive mix of desperation, pride, anger, sense of powerlessness, local tradition of resistance and religious fervor.

A similar mix of factors is now motivating young Pashtuns to volunteer for suicide missions in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Further evidence that suicide bombers are responding to humiliation is found in the 430 recorded biographies of suicide bombers which were carefully analyzed by terrorist experts Haqqani and Kimmage. Professor Riaz Hassan, author of a forthcoming book on suicide bombing, tells us. For one, the conventional wisdom that bombers are insane or religious fanatics is wrong.

Typically, most suicide bombers are psychologically normal and are deeply integrated into social networks and emotionally attached to their national communities. Individual bombers show no personality disorders and the attacks themselves are often politically motivated, aimed at achieving specific strategic goals such as forcing concessions or generating greater support. Moreover, the motivations are complex: "humiliation, revenge, and altruism" all drive the individual to engage in, and the community to overlook, suicide bombing. Indeed, as Hassan notes, participating in suicide bombing can fulfill a range of meanings from the "personal to communal." Without understanding these motivations and addressing them, it would

appear the governments or organizations that seek to end suicide bombings are likely to be disappointed. Humiliation, revenge and altruism play a key role at the organizational and individual levels in shaping the sub-culture that promotes suicide bombings. Humiliation is an emotional process that seeks to discipline the target party's behavior by attacking and lowering their own and others' opinions of whether they deserve respect.

Revenge is also a response to the continuous suffering of an aggrieved community. At the heart of the whole process are perceptions of personal harm, unfairness and injustice, and the anger, indignation, and hatred associated with such perceptions. The motivation for jihad is almost always . . . the dilemma of the humiliated Muslim nation, victimized by the joint evil forces of kufr (unbelief, embodied by the United States as the enemy bent on the destruction of Islam) and tawaghit (tyrants who have set themselves up, or are propped up, as gods on earth).

Although Americans tend to think of suicide bombers as “ individual people taking individual decisions to kill people” says Timothy Spengler, they usually operate as members of highly structured terrorist groups. For bombers-in-training, feelings of shame and humiliation—even their individual identities—are replaced by identification with the group, as psychiatrist Vamik Volkan explains: “ In normal life, a person who wants to kill himself has low self-esteem. For the suicide bombers it was the opposite—by killing yourself, you gain self-esteem.

These were people with cracks in their personality that could be filled up, as if with cement, with the large group identity. So their individuality was erased. ” Once recruits have identified with a terrorist group, they are willing

to do anything asked by the group and take extreme risks because they feel invincible. Their individual motives and values are replaced by the motives and values of the terrorist group, and disagreement or questioning of the group's norms is not encouraged.

Men attach more value to vengeance than women; and young people are more prepared to act in a vengeful manner than older individuals. It is not surprising, then, to find that most suicide bombers are both young and male. The key to understanding suicide bombers, then, is to understand the organizations and groups that recruit and train them to be the people you know them as. Understanding the terrorist organization's logic is more important than understanding individual motivations in explaining suicide attacks.

Suicide bombings have high symbolic value because the willingness of the committers to die signals high resolve and dedication to their cause. They serve as symbols of a just struggle, stimulate popular support, generate financial support for the organization and become a source of new recruits for future suicide missions. As Cronin concludes, " Although . . . individual suicide attackers . . . are not technically ' crazy,' . . . they are often manipulated by the pressures and belief structures of the group". The causes of suicide bombings lie not in individual psychopathology but in broader social conditions.

Understanding and knowledge of these conditions is vital for developing appropriate public policies and responses to protect the public. Suicide bombings are carried out by motivated individuals associated with community based organizations. Strategies aimed at finding ways to induce

communities to abandon such support would curtail support for terrorist organizations. Strategies for eliminating or at least addressing collective grievances in concrete and effective ways would have a significant, and, in many cases, immediate impact on easing the conditions that nurture the subcultures of suicide bombings.

Support for suicide bombing attacks is unlikely to diminish without tangible progress in achieving at least some of the fundamental goals that suicide bombers and those sponsoring and supporting them share. The most important choice a suicide attacker makes is not when to press the trigger, but whether or not to join a terrorist group. (figure 2) Figure1 [pic] Figure 2

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