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SUICIDE TERRORISM

Modern 'martyrs' or exploited prey at the altar of politics?

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The “war on terrorism” proves to be constantly changing, and every emerging terrorist action demands new techniques to counter it. Suicide terrorism has received a great deal of attention from scholars and analysts during the past decade, although terrorism is nothing new per se. The dramatically increased frequency and lethality of such incidents in the post-9/11 era have led academics and practitioners in a plethora of disciplines to try to identify what motivates, sustains and spreads terrorism.

Dzhennet Abdurakhmanova, 17, one of the suicide bombers in the Moscow Metro attacks in 2010, poses with her husband, Umalat Magomedov. Since 2001, there has been an increase in women participating in terrorist attacks.

What about “suicide terrorism”?

Numbers usually tell the truth, and the global records are indicative: Suicide bombings represent a minority of the overall terrorist attacks but cause the majority of human casualties related to terrorism. Between 2000 and 2004 (Atran 2006, 127) nearly 7,000 people lost their lives in 472 suicide attacks in 22 countries; even more were wounded. These numbers become even more impressive when taking into account that almost 85 percent of the incidents during the past 25 years took place between 2004 and 2008 (Wright 2008), while attacks increased to unprecedented numbers.¹ The reduced number of suicide attacks recorded globally in 2008 — 469 attacks, compared with 608 in 2007 — is mostly ascribed to a declining number of incidents in Iraq. On the other hand, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of countries where suicide attacks are perpetrated² (Merari *et al.* 2010a, 89). Additionally, in the period from 1981 to 2008,³ only a few of the 2,937 suicide bombers around the globe acted individually and were not sent by organized groups (Merari *et al.* 2010b, 103).

Hoffman (2006, 132-133) and Speckhard (2006, 3) stressed the tactical advantages that make suicide bombing the preferred method of attack. The combination of high success in urban areas, inexpensive preparation and simple execution result in the creation of the “smart human bomb.” The cost is \$150 and a person willing to die to create the “poor insurgent’s F-16.” The brutal outcome incorporates agility and flexibility to maximize the lethality of the detonation, resulting in an extreme sense of horror and intimidation in the targeted society. The perpetrator needs no escape plan because his death is a precondition for the operation’s success. This is a guarantee that there is no chance the bomber will be arrested and interrogated afterward. It also prevents authorities from tracking bombers back to their hideouts. These traits lead to the theory that suicide bombing could be considered a military innovation (Horowitz 201, 39). Media coverage of the incident is a “force multiplier” for the psychological impact on the local society. The global attention shows the strategic psychological impact of the suicide bomb.

How can we stop these atrocious tactics when military means are insufficient? How

could we deter or even dissuade those willing to die as pious martyrs, given that the global strategy against them appears to be futile? The first step is to learn about and understand these “human bombs.”

Religious or social motivation?

In detailed research from all the recorded suicide attacks worldwide between 1985 and 2001, Pape (2003, 345) said suicide terrorism is “the threat of punishment to coerce a target government to change policy, especially to cause democratic states to withdraw forces from territory terrorists view as their homeland.” He claims that it stems from a broader strategy aimed at political goals. Terrorism is used as a tool in vulnerable and weak democratic countries sustained by foreign military occupation. Weak authoritarian states are not usually targeted because it’s difficult to organize such operations there. Recently, he expanded on his thesis (Pape 2008, 275), stating that suicide terrorism is usually the outcome of a foreign democratic power’s military occupation of a society with different religious views. When other means are not effective in forcing this power to withdraw, suicide terrorism is used. This terrorism is not always motivated by religious extremism but often by political objectives such as self-determination, counteraction to colonization, opposition to foreign interference in internal issues and exploitation of natural resources. He clarifies that “occupation” is a broad term, referring not only to the military forces’ physical presence but also to the interaction in political terms and to financial and ideological cooperation between governments, such as the cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Piven (2007/2008, 734) argues that suicide terrorism “is considered a reasoned response to political injustice and humiliation.” He recognizes the role of religion not in initiating but in amplifying the motivation caused by the feeling of oppression. The combination of oppressive circumstances and indoctrination makes demonization of the opponent easier. This contributes to the construction of a foe even if he doesn’t already exist. In his “cosmic war” theory,⁴ Juergensmeyer (2008, 421) proposes that there are no innocent people, only representatives of a collective enemy. The primary enemy is the political or religious



Relatives mourn a victim of the Moscow Metro suicide bombings during a funeral ceremony on April 1, 2010. Russian officials called the incident “the deadliest and most sophisticated terrorist attack in the Russian capital in six years.”

entity that threatens the terrorist group, and the secondary enemy could be any individual or entity supporting the primary. One must remember that radical Muslims don't see the ongoing war as a global campaign against terrorism but as a war against Islam (Esposito and Mogahed 2007, 29).

Hence, religion has a role to play by uniting Islamic populations under the common sacred values and political demands to fight for, but it's not the major incentive for suicide terrorism. Muslims are “attached” to their moral and spiritual values (Esposito and Mogahed 2007, 37) rising from their religion. They regard these values as critical for their cultural and social survival and progress. We have to bear in mind that Islam (Ali and Post 2008, 626. Palazzi 2008, 52-58) strictly forbids *haram* (committing suicide). Islam became a tool in the hands of radical Muslims,⁵ who tried to transform it from a religion to a political ideology. They misinterpreted terms such as *Jihad and martyrdom*, exploiting the piety and the psychology of their co-religionists,⁶ recruiting and inculcating them with the will to die to achieve political objectives.⁷

According to the Quran, the *defensive jihad* and even the *qital*⁸ are terms irrelevant to the ascribed translation. The real *istihad*, which means martyrdom and self-sacrifice in the name of Allah, is ideologically far from suicide (Dunn 2010, 18). The word is even further from the “holy war” that Osama bin Laden waged against the foreign occupiers, since it doesn't refer to taking other people's lives. Hereof we'll search even deeper for the fundamental traits of suicide terrorism.

The social and behavioral factors

Iraq became a contemporary case study of suicide terrorism because of the almost daily suicide attacks.⁹ From the perspective of jihadists this war is a broader, global resistance against Western culture and democracy. A potential victory is as vital for al-Qaida as it is for the coalition forces and U.S. The same aspects prevail in the Palestinians' conflict with Israel.

On both of these fronts, another social factor vital for suicide terrorism is indoctrination. In Palestine, children learn from kindergarten to accept *shahids* (martyrs) as heroes who defy death (Ali and Post 2008,

639). The martyrs are honored to be chosen for such a mission and fight inequity by punishing their enemies according to God's will. Hence, they are named "self-chosen martyrs," perceived as honored soldiers in a great war, offering their lives for the sake of the community and religion. Palestinian males grow up dreaming of being the next potential chosen one for the "honor of martyrdom" so their names will be perpetually remembered with social approval. When children are radically nurtured and brainwashed against a hated adversary (Piven 2007/2008, 740), and their psyche is programmed through the everyday terror, reprogramming is infeasible.

The media and Internet are critical multi-functional tools for suicide terrorism (Ali and Post 2008, 630). The exploitation of videos and various communication networks provides a perfect option for recruitment (Townsend 2007, 44). It is also a very effective tool for propaganda and interaction between social groups or individuals with common beliefs. Technology offers local insurgents the potential of manipulating a global audience and building a network for close connection between the country of origin and the country where immigrants from the country of origin live.

The Information Age is empowering terrorist groups seeking political legitimacy. The groups are trying to convince the local and global societies that they are fighters and insurgents, not terrorists. They are fighting against oppressive foreign occupation and their cause is just. On terrorist websites, immigrants see pictures and videos of "martyrs" dying for that cause and hear stories describing the pain, humiliation and catastrophe that relatives suffer. These images and sounds travel around the world, awakening sympathy and support. Support abroad grows even if the descendents of immigrants have never visited their homeland.

People are deeply influenced by the "martyrdom" of known or unknown people who blow themselves up to protest the political and unjust conditions in their country. This amplifies the moral obligation among immigrants to contribute to the struggle and aids recruitment. The sentimental, societal and religious attachment to the terrorist cause draws volunteers for self-sacrifice. The social structures of the areas mostly affected



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Security officials walk with two men arrested and accused of plotting a suicide attack in May 2010 in Peshawar, Pakistan.

by the phenomenon of suicide terrorism are a derivative of nomadic culture¹⁰ (Shay 2007, 177). When their community is threatened, the feeling of obligation to participate is generated so as not to let down the rest of the tribe. This fosters the "self-motivation" mechanism of foreign fighters, who are determined to sacrifice even before they approach terrorist networks (Argo 2006, 3). This feeling stems mostly from images on television and reading about tribal members on the Internet or the news.

Living under the conditions in Palestine and Iraq, the inhabitants exhibit behavior strongly determined by despair, victimization, helplessness and lack of optimistic prospects for amelioration (Ali and Post 2008, 640). From these components, suicide bombing is a desperate message to the global audience, an awful reaction to the hopelessness of their lives. But what is important is that their actions intend to take the lives of others as well as their own, a fact that distinguishes suicide from murder (Townsend 2007, 41).

Amid other behavioral factors, we can't disregard the "mimetic desire" among peers to express violence (Juergensmeyer 2008, 419). Inside their organization, the would-be bombers see each other as competitors, so mimesis is more plausible as motivation than aggression or religious symbols.

From the standpoint of religious diversity and cultural and regional factors, terrorism is a reaction stemming from revenge and the belief that this is a way to redeem lost honor (Ali and Post 2008, 643/Townsend 2007, 40). Because a family member, a sibling or a close

friend has been killed or abused by opposing forces, the would-be suicide bomber is strongly inspired by vengeance.¹¹ In other cases, such as when faith or social beliefs stigmatize rape

The deadliest attack in Iraq in 2010 occurred on February 12, when a female suicide bomber detonated herself south of Baghdad.

victims and prevent them from getting married and having children,¹² ignominy is a motive and the characteristic paradigm of purification through martyrdom. These kinds of traumas, combined with a sense of injustice, misery and humiliation, prompt aggressive reactions amplified through group psychology, influence, amity and interaction (Piven 2007/2008, 739). This individual

process, interacting with group mentality and indoctrination, produces the suicide attacker (Townsend 2007, 43). Simultaneously, there exists a charismatic leader who exploits the despair and manipulates the vulnerability of these people to transform them into “human bombs.” Perceiving suicide bombers as “brainwashed pawns” or mentally disabled is a mistake. Their own will to die is the primary precondition for the existence of the phenomenon.

Female suicide bombers

The increased participation of women in suicide attacks can't be disregarded. The number of incidents in Iraq rose from eight in 2007 (Ghosh 2008) to 29 by September 2008 (Peter 2008) and drew the attention of many analysts. The deadliest attack in Iraq in 2010 occurred on February 12, when a female suicide bomber detonated herself south of Baghdad, killing more than 40 Shiite women and children (Arraf 2010), all pilgrims. While other kinds of attacks decreased in Iraq, suicide bombings by women — harder to detect than male bombers — rose dramatically in 2009.

After more than 20 years of multiple female suicide bomber waves,¹³ terrorist groups have leveraged the tactical advantages of using women in terrorist attacks¹⁴ (Burton and Stewart 2007). They hide the explosives under the women's idiomorphic clothing (burqa or niqab), making the women appear pregnant. There is a cultural resistance to searching women, who are generally considered nonviolent. Female suicide

bombers can move through security without arousing suspicion and bypass security checkpoints to reach their target untraced. The final outcome receives even greater media attention and coverage, since the perpetrator is a woman, and this constitutes a force multiplier for the terrorist group.

The motivation of the women is similar to that of their male counterparts. Again, religion isn't the principal motive (McGirk 2007), since eternal life with 72 virgins in paradise can't be an incentive. All the social and behavioral factors that motivate males are valid in the case of “female smart bombs.” Women are more likely to be seeking revenge for a personal loss or trying to regain lost honor from being a rape victim (Bloom 2007, 95). This was apparently evident in the testimony of a woman named Samira Jassim, whom Iraqi officials arrested in 2010. In a videotaped confession, she told interrogators she had recruited more than 28 women to blow themselves up. She was part of a plot in which young women were raped and persuaded to become suicide bombers as their only escape from shame and to reclaim their honor (Arraf 2010).

It's also notable that “converts” are considered to be among the most dangerous groups and the principal future resource pool for terrorist entities. That's not only because most of them have European passports, making it easier for them to travel around. The potential need to prove that they are more pious than their co-religionists born into the faith makes them even more radical in belief and deed.

Opportunities in responding to suicide terrorism

We should focus on preventive measures to reduce the factors that affect suicidal terrorism in Europe, perpetrated mostly by homegrown Muslim extremists or converts (The Economist 2008). Europe absorbs attacks aimed at the West, although the U.S. is seen as the primary target. That generates an internal European counterterrorism effort, seen mostly as a law enforcement assignment in homeland defense, to deal with the “grass-root cells.” The potential formation of special links between organized crime and these cells is of even greater concern to European police agencies. On the other



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hand, the United States' counterterrorism effort is mostly an external "war on terrorism" that it fights using military means, something that can't be done in Europe.

Another challenge is the cooperation of counterterrorism agencies at the national and multinational level. Intelligence and the free flow of information are keys to success. Even companies that provide materials for bomb building could collaborate by informing the proper agencies about clients ordering unusual quantities. We should operate in an information channel such as al-Qaida's, where a simple call across a global network triggers a specific reaction.

As Whitelaw (2008) reveals, the Combating Terrorism Center in the U.S. recently released personnel records captured in Iraq containing the biographical and personal details of terrorist recruits. The records could be very helpful for intelligence agencies around the globe and the paradigm of countering suicide terrorism by prevention through intelligence. In a similar way, we could also track and disrupt the organizations that sponsor and finance terrorism.

The community involvement perspective

offers a very interesting alternative (Gaylord 2008). Police officers who receive counterterrorism training could transfer their knowledge to groups of citizens, involving them in an early warning social system, a neighborhood watch program. On the one hand, it's impossible for law enforcement agencies to be everywhere; on the other hand, it's very easy for a resident to recognize something unusual where they live or work.

A similar initiative has been undertaken with the foundation of the Daughters of Iraq program, under the guidance of U.S. officials. The aim is to train female police officers to search suspicious women at security checkpoints. As O'Rourke (2008) said, the program does not seem to be very successful since, because of social restrictions, only 30 women offered to participate. The point is the suicide attackers target first the "occupation forces," not their countrymen. The fact that religious entities have shifted their tactics to recruiting women for suicide attacks suggests that they'll also develop new techniques to bypass security checkpoints.

Governmental cooperation should also be extended to religions. The role of Islam in

Left: Iraqi Sajida Mubarek Atrous al-Rishawi shows off an explosive belt as she confesses on Jordanian state-run television to her failed bid to set off the bomb inside one of three Amman hotels targeted by al-Qaida in 2005. The media can be an effective tool in counterterrorism.

Right: Pakistani police display suicide jackets seized in March 2010. Companies that provide bomb-making materials can prevent attacks by informing the authorities about unusual orders.

suicide terrorism has already been analyzed. The false image that the radical Muslims created, concerning the oppression of their religion by Christians, and the clash between the two, raised skepticism and mistrust between Arab countries and the West. Antagonism between Sunnis and Shiites has also created another clash, an internal and bloody struggle with a vast number of Muslim victims.

The development of a cooperative program to help the Muslim population of a country face the real dimension and destructive results of suicide terrorism is critical to changing Muslim support. Religions have a new role to play, this time an educational one. An initiative by Uzbekistan's Tashkent Islamic University is an excellent model (Palazzi 2008, 58). One of its objectives is to train moderate religious scholars whose task will be to defuse religious fundamentalism and promote dialogue among all religions, including, of course, Muslims, Christians and Jews. This will help emphasize Islam's moderate message and build mutual trust and a common front in condemning suicide terrorism.

The media and Internet are powerful instruments and psychological weapons in the hands of the terrorists, but they can also be effective in counterterrorism. We could handle the media reports on suicide attacks in two ways. First — through required guidelines from experts — by limiting the quantity of news dedicated to terrorist attacks. Second, by attempting to discredit and de-romanticize their use of suicide tactics. If we carefully monitor jihadist websites and infiltrate their Internet chat rooms, we'll deny them the ability to reconfigure, survive and function as a global network. These actions could change the way some youths think. They could also change public opinion and recruitment, in broader terms. There are many indications that terrorist groups are facing difficulties in recruitment.

The fact that they are recruiting children¹⁵ is not only a brutal shift in tactics — using

people who don't raise suspicion — but it's also a sign that they are short of human resources (Ghazi 2007).

We have to focus on the psyche of would-be bombers to send the message that there is hope for a better solution and a peaceful way to settle disputes instead of killing themselves along with dozens of innocent people. We need to broadcast anti-suicide and anti-terrorism messages, promoting all the reasons that someone has to live for not to die for. We have to fight the radical indoctrination by explaining the risks of terrorism and by proving that the "atrocious enemy" is human. This demands a very thorough understanding of the society to focus on, but also a well-prepared and applied public diplomacy. The objective isn't to undermine their sacred values but to convince them that the colonization era is over and that Western culture's vision isn't to exploit their natural resources or political and religious oppression. The goal is to promote human rights and equality in economical, political, educational and social terms.

The fortification and use of advanced security measures to guard sensitive infrastructure isn't enough to prevent suicide terrorism. NATO has to leverage "soft power" operations. Experts should study the plausible interactions between terrorism networks and organized crime. Educational programs for countering suicide terrorist ideologies should be considered in countries where migrants could be radicalized or influenced. These programs could extend into conflict zones through peacekeeping operations and reconstruction teams. Simultaneously, the West should minimize military action and apply a political and psychological strategy to thwart terrorist activities, adopting the "responsibility-to-protect" concept.

The future

The military offensive Israel launched on January 3, 2009, in Gaza has generated the next wave of Palestinian recruits,¹⁶ which will bring into effect the "third intifada." The revival of once-dormant suicide attacks in Russia and the Caucasus contradicts Vladimir Putin's official declaration of the end of the Chechen War in April 2009

A Russian woman commemorates the victims of the 2010 Moscow Metro suicide bombings. Forty people died in the attacks.



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(Lyal 2010, 2). The failed suicide bombing attempt in December 2009 of a Nigerian on a Northwest Airlines plane¹⁷ en route to the U.S. fosters the perception of further evolution of suicide terrorism in terrorist groups' operational planning.

Terrorist groups are not willing to disavow such an acute, effective and cheap strategic weapon. But they are searching for innovative technology that will be less costly to mujahedeen and martyrs.¹⁸ Bergman (2008) expects a new insurgent strategy to emerge in two to five years, planned by "a new breed of highly educated al-Qaida terrorist." Her words seem to be accurate, since the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism warned that a nuclear or biological attack is likely to occur in a major city within the next five years.¹⁹

Umar Hamza bin Laden, one of Osama bin Laden's sons, was assigned to recruit children between the ages of 13 and 16 from West Africa,²⁰ especially Mauritania. On December 3, 2009, a Somali suicide bomber from Denmark killed more than 22 people, including four government ministers, at a graduation ceremony in Mogadishu.²¹ In December 2009, five Americans (three of Pakistani, one of Egyptian and one of Yemeni descent) were arrested in Pakistan, suspected of links to terrorist groups.²² All this points to Africa's growing involvement in terrorism but also to the significant attrition of recruits. The recruitment of foreign would-be bombers is critical.

Alas, suicide terrorists might develop even more brutal and atrocious tactics. Therefore, the international community must remain alert. In our versatile struggle against terrorism, we have to be ready and must realize that we can't confront it solely through military means. Maybe the aerial bombings of cities, or dogmas such as "shock and awe," are not proper responses to the more (or even less) violent terrorist tactics (Asad 2009, 20). We have to understand our enemy and deter and dissuade him from acting through radical violence. We have to exploit all means of soft power to thwart all aspects of terrorism. □

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A bomb blast hits the American consulate in Peshawar, Pakistan, on April 5, 2010. Islamic militants armed with guns, grenades and suicide car bombs killed 46 people. Pakistan's Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.

