The Role of Religion in the Generation of Suicide Bombers

Sadik H. Kassim, PhD

Suicide terrorism is an international problem that endangers the well-being of whole populations. Standard explanations suggest that religious fanaticism is a primary driving force in the generation of suicide bombers. A growing body of empirically based scholarship, however, indicates that suicide terrorism is a multifactorial phenomenon that cannot easily be explained away as an outcome of religious fanaticism. Religion in general, Islam in particular, plays a minimal direct role in the generation of suicide bombers. This brief article will summarize recent studies regarding the root causes of suicide terrorism as they pertain to the fields of behavioral health, violence, and violence prevention. [*Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention* 8:204–208 (2008)]

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A recent report by European Police Office (Europol), the European Union's official law enforcement agency, states that ''Islamist terrorism is motivated in whole or in part by an extreme interpretation of Islam and the use of violence is regarded by its practitioners as a divine duty or sacramental act'' (Europol 2007). It is a popular notion expressed by many policy planners, journalists, government officials, and the popular media: ''Islamist'' terrorism is a natural outcome of extremist tendencies inherent in the religion. Suicide bombings, in particular, are viewed as the ultimate manifestation of religious fanaticism gone awry. A growing body of scholarship, however, suggests that religion in general, Islam in particular, plays a minimal direct role in the generation of suicide bombers. Rather, suicide bombings appear to largely be a response to occupation, or since September 11, 2001, to perceptions of general political oppression in the Muslim world. This essay will discuss the literature regarding suicide bombers as it pertains to the field of victimology.

Before delving into the psychological motivations and profiles of the offenders (i.e., suicide bombers), it behooves to ask: who are the victims of Islamist terrorism and suicide bombing attacks? Typical depictions suggest an intercivilizational conflict between Islam and the West, the primary casualties of which are non-Muslim civilians. In truth, however, not only are Muslims frequently targeted, they are disproportionately the victims of terrorism. Consider, for instance, the most recent U.S. State department report on Terrorism, which states, ''As was the case in 2005, Muslims again bore a substantial share of being the victims of terrorist attacks in 2006'' (U.S. Department of State, 2007). Specifically, of the 58,000 individuals worldwide who were either killed or
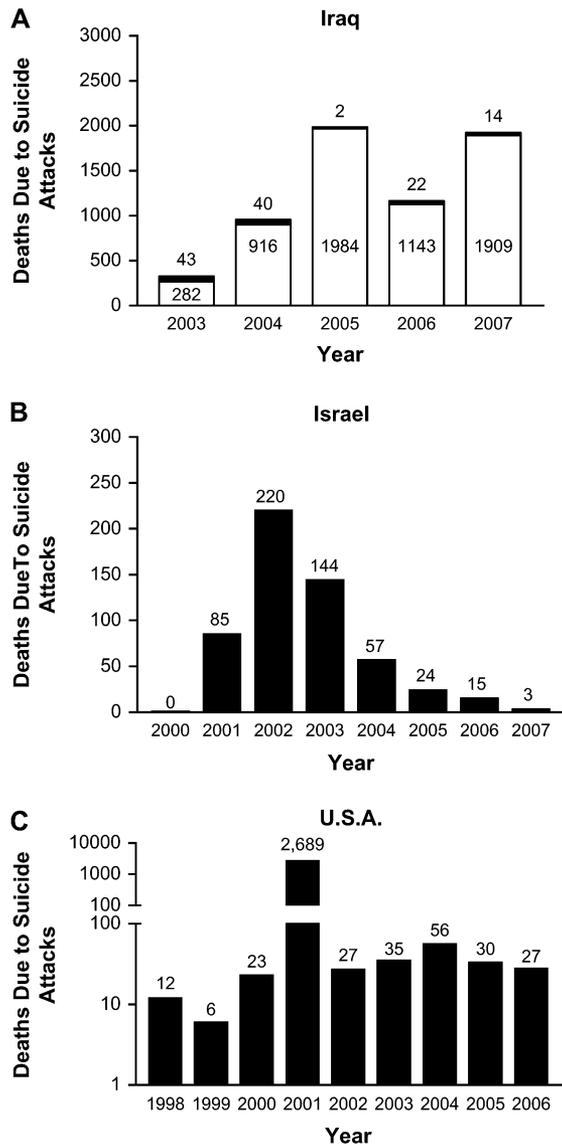
Contact author: Sadik H. Karsim, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, 125 S. 31st Street (TRL Suite 2000), Philadelphia, PA 19104-3403. E-mail: sadik@mail.med.upenn.edu.

A

Iraq

B

Israel

C

U.S.A.

FIGURE 1

Country case studies of suicide bombing victims. (A) Figures based on newswire reports as of June 1, 2007. Lower number represents total Muslim victims, top number represents total non-Muslim victims. (B) Figures based on a 2006 report by the Institute for Counter Terrorism. (C) Figures based on the U.S. State Department's *Country reports on terrorism.*

injured by terrorist attacks in 2006, well over 50% of the victims were Muslims, and most were victims of attacks in Iraq. In contrast, there were 28 American casualties and 27 injuries worldwide last year due to terrorism. An examination of the numbers of suicide bombing victims in three countries, Iraq, Israel, and the United States, suggest a disproportionate number of casualties in the Muslim world as well (Figures 1A–1C). Except for Iraq (Figure 1A), the number of suicide bombing victims has steadily decreased in Israel (Figure 1B) and the United States (Figure 1C). Moreover, the empirical evidence indicates that the suicide attacks of 2001 were anomalous events in the recent history of the United States, whereas they have become commonplace in Iraq, a trend that shows no signs of waning. Collectively, these data suggest that suicide bombing is a problem that affects civilized people and institutions worldwide irrespective of religious affiliation. It is therefore intellectually dishonest to portray this as an issue of the West versus Islam.

According to the most widely accepted definition, suicide attacks are ''an operational method in which the very act of attack is dependent upon the death of the perpetrator'' (Ganor, 2000). Suicide attacks are not new; a brief historical review reveals this terrorist technique to be a tool employed by militarily weak politically motivated parties against stronger foes. Zealots and Sicaris, revolutionary Jewish groups of ancient Rome, are the world's first documented suicide terrorists (Atran, 2003). Members waged public campaigns of assassination from approximately 4 BCE to 70 CE; acts of violence aimed at fomenting a popular uprising against the Roman occupiers of Judea. During the 11th and 12th centuries, the Hashshashin (Assassins), a mystical society of Ismaili Muslims, waged a campaign of suicide missions against leaders of the occupying Sunni Muslim empires and later against leaders of the occupying Christian Crusaders. Japanese kamikaze pilots similarly undertook an organized, planned, and persistent program of suicide attacks against American military troops during World War II. Between July 1944 and August 1945, 3,843 Japanese pilots gave their

lives sinking at least 375 U.S. naval vessels, killing 12,300 servicemen, and wounding another 36,400 (Atran). Not a single suicide attack occurred between 1945 and 1980.

October 23, 1985, proved to be a historical watershed in the modern usage of suicide terrorism. It was on this day that suicide car bomb attacks carried out by Hezbollah led to the death of 241 American soldiers and 58 French troops in the city of Beirut. The attacks compelled the French and American militaries to abandon their operations in Lebanon. More importantly, the attacks encouraged terrorist groups from Hamas to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (Tamil Tigers) to al-Qaeda to adopt this method of attack (Pape, 2005).

In the most comprehensive study to date, the political scientist Pape (2005) has catalogued and analyzed every suicide attack from 1980 to 2003. The data reveal critical insights into the motivations of suicide bombers. Of the 315 suicide attacks that took place during this period, 301 were carried out as part of an organized political campaign of coercion against democratic governments. Specifically, the top three instigators documented by Pape are the Tamil Tigers (69 attacks), Hezbollah (36 attacks), and al-Qaeda (21 attacks). Religion was not the root cause of any of the campaigns examined: the specific and strategic goal was to trigger the withdrawal of military forces from the terrorists' national homeland. Moreover, based on primary demographic data, Pape found that, of the 384 suicide bombers responsible for the attacks during this time period, 43% were religious, whereas 57% were secular. This trend is epitomized by the ideological affiliation of Hezbollah's attackers: of 41 suicide bombers, only 8% were affiliated with Islamic fundamentalism compared to 21% that were Communist/Socialist and 71% that were Christian.

Lack of secular education is often cited as a causative factor in the generation of suicide bombers. Within such an explanatory framework, Madrassas (Islamic religious schools) are considered breeding grounds of suicide bombers. For example, the July 2004 report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the 9/11 Commission Report) describes Madrassas as ''incubators of violet extremism.'' Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in a widely cited memo on the global war on terror writes: ''Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the Madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training, and deploying against us?'' (Rumsfeld, 2007). Yet, analysis by Bergen and Pandey (2006) reveals that of the 79 terrorists responsible for five of the worst anti-Western suicide attacks—the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the Africa embassy bombings in 1998, the September 11 attacks, the Bali nightclub bombings in 2002, and the London Bombings in 2005—only in rare cases were Madrassa graduates involved. All those credited with masterminding the attacks had university degrees. Of the remaining terrorists, 54% had some college education or graduated with a degree compared to 52% of Americans who can claim the same. Moreover, 48% of those that attended college attended schools in the West; only 11% of the terrorists examined had attended a Madrassa.

Another popular set of explanations of terrorism centers on mental illness or innate criminality. The mental illness thesis is dealt a strong blow by the fact that of the 384 psychological histories of suicide bombers examined by Pape (2005), there was not a single documented case of mental illness, such as depression, psychosis, or past suicide attempts. Moreover, there was no evidence of major criminal behavior nor a single report that a suicide attacker was gay, an adulterer, or otherwise living in a way that would bring shame in a traditional society. There was only one case of probable

mental retardation (a ''feeble-minded'' Chechen female bomber).

A common stereotype is that terrorism is a product of poor, desperate, naive, single young men from third world countries, vulnerable to brainwashing and recruitment into terror. Empirical evidence, however, suggests otherwise. Forensic Psychiatrist and former CIA intelligence officer Sageman (2005) has compiled the most in-depth biographical database on members of global terrorist networks to date. Based on data from over 400 biographies, Sageman finds that 75% of the terrorists examined came from upper- or middle-class backgrounds. The vast majority—90%—came from caring intact families. As a group, the terrorists were well educated with over 63% having some college education. Nearly 73% were married and the majority had children. Only 1% of the sample had hints of a thought disorder, which is below the base rate for thought disorder worldwide. The only significant finding was that the future terrorists felt isolated, lonely, and emotionally alienated; otherwise, their heterogeneity precluded the detection of any common characteristic specific to them (Sageman, 2004).

Alienation preceded membership in terror networks in a majority of cases examined. Specifically, Sageman found that nearly 80% of the terror networks joined Jihad while living in a country other than their own. Discipleship, a kind of mentor–student indoctrination, accounted for only 8% of the network. The remaining network came to Jihad informally through kinship and friendship bonds, 20 and 70%, respectively (Sageman, 2005). Social bonds predated any ideological commitment. There was no evidence of brainwashing: The future terrorists simply acquired the common beliefs of their friends. Within such a context, religion is used as a tool by terrorist organizations in recruiting and in other efforts in service of the broader strategic objective of ridding Muslim countries of ''corrupting'' American and Western cultural and political influences, as well as military presence, particularly from Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Prophet Mohammed (Gerges, 2006). Holmes (2005) in his analysis of statements by al-Qaeda shows that Osama bin Laden's rationales for September 11 have usually been secular rather than religious, bent on punishing Western injustices, not impieties. Islamic ideology therefore is an idiom articulating the frustrations of alienated Muslims; it is not the root cause of these frustrations. Argo (2006), a Political Scientist, eloquently summarizes the implications of these findings when she states that

The important point here is that interpersonal relationships were at the center of these individuals' radicalization, not psychopathologies, discipleship, or prior ideological beliefs. This suggests a profoundly different mechanisms for how people develop radical beliefs: Emotion and social ties precede the acquisition of an ideology. Choosing terror, then, might seem more a product of chance—the type and intensity of grievances one lives with, the means available for dealing with such stressors, plus the networks one falls into—than anything else. Furthermore, and with huge implications for notions of deterrence and how we fight terror, joining the jihad is a social and emotional process that happens over time.

Upon joining the terror network, it becomes difficult for an individual to abandon the movement without betraying his closest friends and family. This natural and intense loyalty to the group inspires the participant's faith and transforms alienated Muslims into fanatical terrorists.

Based on this brief review, it can be surmised that suicide terrorism is a multifactorial

phenomenon that cannot easily be explained away as an outcome of Islamic religiosity. A multidisciplinary approach to understanding root causes will help in the articulation, formulation, and execution of rational policies aimed at curbing the use of suicide terrorism as a strategy by militarily weak political national movements. Moreover, because suicide terrorism is an international problem that endangers the well being of whole populations, it is imperative for people of all faiths to enhance cooperation between each other to combat this problem.

Acknowledgment

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