

# Killing to Make a Killing

J. Peter Pham

Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University, 2005), 280 pp., \$24.95.

Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism* (New York: Basic, 2005), 415 pp., \$26.

Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House), 352 pp., \$25.95.

**S**UICIDE OPERATIONS are not only one of the most prominent features of contemporary terrorism, but they are also increasingly the phenomenon's primary manifestation. At a time when terrorist incidents of all kinds have declined by nearly half—from a peak of 666 in 1987 to 348 in 2001, according to University of Chicago professor Robert A. Pape's count—suicide attacks have escalated sharply from an average of three per year in the 1980s to nearly fifty in 2003. Over that same period, suicide terrorism has established itself as terrorism's most lethal form: While accounting for only 3 percent of all terrorist incidents from 1980 through 2003, it was responsible for 48 percent of all victims killed by terrorists, even if the immense casualties of September 11, 2001, are *not* counted. Despite its significance, the phenomenon of suicide is poorly understood—at least by its intended targets.

The very nature of the problem contributes a great deal to the confusion. By definition, suicide terrorism is a more

extreme form than other terrorist actions aimed at garnering publicity, mobilizing support or coercing opponents, precisely because it presupposes that to achieve these ends the perpetrator must adopt a *modus operandi*—whether wearing a vest packed with explosives, driving a car bomb or piloting an airplane—that requires his or her death in order to carry out a successful attack against the chosen target. This characteristic of the phenomenon has led to all manner of explanations. Some have focused on the premeditated certainty of death of the individual suicide bombers and proceeded to describe them as idealists whose willingness to sacrifice themselves must be born from an innate justice of their cause or hopelessness of their circumstances. Others have focused on what they perceive as the phenomenon's fanatical Muslim religious dimension. (At one point in the 1980s, it was even described by the experts *du jour* as specifically endogenous to the Shi'a community.) While varying considerably in both their diagnoses and in the consequent practical prescriptions, these explanations share the common presumption that suicide terrorists somehow constitute a radical discontinuity in the international arena and that only an equally abrupt shift in political approach—whether through a wholesale transformation of Muslim societies (and those in other troubled places around the globe) or by somehow magically redressing the injustice, oppression and other “root causes” that feature prominently in terrorists' complaints and demands—is adequate to the challenge.

IN HIS new book, however, Pape begs to differ with the latter analyses, which have to a certain extent been received by the policy mainstream as conventional wisdom. Expanding on research he initially presented in the August 2003 issue of the *American Political Science Review*, Pape compiled a database of every suicide bombing and attack around the globe from 1980–2003—some 315 in all—in which the terrorist killed himself or herself while attempting to kill others. Pape's data show that there is little direct causal connection between suicide terrorism and any single religious tradition or religion at all: Religious fanaticism, after all, cannot explain why the leading perpetrators of suicide attacks, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, who carried out 76 of the 315 incidents studied, are Marxist-Leninists whose members hail from Hindu families but are now militantly anti-religious. Religion, according to Pape, is more likely to be instrumentalized by terrorist organizations than to be their root cause. Likewise, popular early explanations that played off the psychological dispositions that might drive individuals to become suicide bombers have been contradicted by the widening range of socio-economic backgrounds from which known perpetrators have hailed.

Pape's analysis of the data leads him to the conclusion that even if many suicide attackers are irrational or fanatical, the organizations that recruit, train and dispatch them are not. The evidence that emerges is that suicide terrorism, instead of being impenetrable to conventional political analysis, responds quite well to it—if anything, Martha Crenshaw's quarter-century-old proposition that terrorism is best understood in terms of its strategic function is perhaps even truer when applied to suicide terrorism. In fact, Pape elucidates three general patterns in the data. First, nearly all suicide attacks—

301 of the 315 examined—are part of organized campaigns, rather than isolated incidents. Second, democratic states are more likely to be targets of suicide attacks than non-democratic regimes: the United States, France, India, Israel, Russia, Sri Lanka and Turkey were the targets of almost every suicide operation in the past two decades. Third, campaigns of suicide terrorism are directed toward the strategic objective of coercing liberal democracies into making territorial concessions.

In Pape's analysis, terrorists groups have engaged in 17 distinct campaigns of suicide terrorism since 1980 (an 18<sup>th</sup>, currently underway in Iraq, began in August 2003): Hizballah in Lebanon against the United States and France (1983–84) and against Israel (1982–85, 1985–86); the Tamil Tigers against Sri Lanka (1990–94, 1995–2000); Hamas against Israel (1994); Hamas and Islamic Jihad against Israel (1994–95); the BKI against India (1995); Hamas against Israel (1996, 1997); the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) against Turkey (1996, 1998–99); the Tamil Tigers against Sri Lanka (2001); Al-Qaeda against the United States (1995–2003); Chechen separatists against Russia (2000–03); Kashmiri separatists against India (2000–03); and Hamas and Islamic Jihad against Israel (2000–03). In each case, the strategic objective of the campaign was to coerce an enemy force to withdraw from a specific territory that the architects of the suicide operations perceived as theirs. And in every one of these campaigns (with a limited exception in the case of the Kurdish struggle against the Turkish government), the lesson the terrorists learned was that their suicide tactics, to one extent or another, paid off: The American and French peacekeepers abandoned Lebanon posthaste, and even the Israeli forces eventually withdrew, albeit with greater deliberation over a longer period; the Sri Lankan government has accepted the principle of a Tamil homeland; Israel is set to disengage from Gaza and has accepted

the presence of the Palestinian Authority in the biblical Jewish lands of Judea and Samaria; and, however one spins it, the United States has essentially pulled its military forces out of Saudi Arabia, Osama bin Laden's first grievance in his 1998 fatwa. If suicide operations have become increasingly the instrument of choice for terrorists, it is because they have seen greater advances for their political causes after they resorted to suicide operations than before. Leaders of terrorist groups have said as much, and both officials of target governments and neutral observers have confirmed their judgment. And, sadly, the concessions gained by past terrorist operations have done little to disabuse the would-be planners of future suicide attacks concerning their own prospects for still greater gains. Pape reproduces a quote from Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Shallah who told a BBC interviewer in November 2001:

The shameful defeat that Israel suffered in southern Lebanon and which caused its army to flee it in terror was not made on the negotiations table but on the battlefield and through jihad and martyrdom . . . . If the enemy could not bear the losses of the war on the border strip with Lebanon, will it be able to withstand a long war of attrition in the heart of its security dimension and major cities?

Why has terrorism proven such an effective political tool? Because democratic states are characterized by greater freedom of movement (which facilitates the operational side of the suicide attack) as well as greater freedom of expression (which both magnifies the shock value of the casualties and leads to debate over the government's policies with respect to the terrorists' grievances). Suicide terrorism is, as Walter Laqueur summarized in his deeply pessimistic *No End to War: Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (2003), asymmetric warfare *par excellence*: The ter-

rorist uses even the most lethal weapons against civilians, while the liberal state, bound by rules and conventions, cannot retaliate with the overwhelming force that is its chief tactical advantage against the enemy. For example, while Kurds can be found in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria—and, arguably, the authoritarian regimes of the latter three countries have been far more brutal toward their Kurdish populations than more liberal Turkey has been—Kurdish militant groups have only used suicide attacks against the government in Ankara. It is only against liberal regimes that suicide terrorists can count on making a killing by killing.

WHILE PAPE'S findings are extremely valuable and useful for understanding why terrorist organizations adopt suicide tactics against external enemies whom they perceive to be militarily occupying their claimed homeland, they tend to gloss over the personal motivations of the perpetrators of suicide terror, the internal dynamics of the groups that dispatch them and the constituencies they seek to represent. Mia Bloom, a political scientist at the University of Cincinnati, takes up the latter concern in *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror*. The volume suffers from several weaknesses, including the author's attempt to include an overly broad range of phenomena (including Jewish Sicarii, Ismaili assassins, Hindu thugs and Japanese kamikaze) under the rubric of "suicide terrorism", despite the evident difference that those historical perpetrators of high-risk attacks still stood a chance, however minute, of surviving, unlike the case of contemporary suicide attackers in which the success of their politically motivated action is predicated on their certain death. Nonetheless, Bloom offers valuable insights into the rational calculus of terrorist groups that adapt their tactics to shifting currents to maximize their influence within their communities, argu-

ing that “the organizations that perpetrated the violence increased or decreased operations in response to the reactions of the larger population.”

Bloom shows that flexibility with regard to the use of suicide tactics, rather than sustained consistency in ideology, is the key to these organizations’ success with their target domestic audiences, on which they rely for recruits and support and for which they must outbid rival groups. George Habash’s Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) is a case in point. While guilty of a string of terrorist actions since the 1960s, including the airline hijackings and the spectacular taking hostage of the OPEC oil ministers, the PFLP had long refused to engage in suicide operations. By the start of the second *intifada* in 2000, however, its stock had declined significantly. The following year, the previously secularist splinter group (Habash himself is Greek Orthodox) began employing the vocabulary of jihad and martyrdom and undertook suicide attacks. As Bloom notes succinctly, “By the time the next public opinion poll was taken (within three months), support for the PFLP returned to its former percentage.”

Whatever the rational incentives for a suicide terrorist’s handlers, whether external or internal, they would have no stock in trade without individuals willing to blow themselves up. While there has been some evidence of suicide bombers coerced into their actions—the 2004 case of Reem al-Rayashi, the 21-year-old mother of two who killed four Israelis by blowing herself up at the Erez border-crossing from Gaza after being caught in adultery, is one example—most seem to be motivated by a combination of religious, social, cultural and material incentives, including spiritual (and, in some cases, physical) delights in a post-mortem paradise, celebrity and even cash payouts. With respect to the last of these, it should be noted that in the case of the

Palestinian conflict with Israel, families of suicide bombers receive a financial bonus amounting to about \$25,000 from Muslim states and foundations, while the families of those killed in conventional open combat with the Israeli Defense Forces receive a paltry \$2,000.

WHAT SUCH a clear examination reveals is quite disturbing: The lesson that terrorists have learned over the last few decades is that, within certain limits, their tactics work. This is a point that Timothy Naftali—a professor at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center of Public Affairs who was commissioned to write an account of earlier U.S. counter-terrorism activities as a background briefing for the 9/11 Commission—has convincingly made, however unintentionally (the author is an academic historian rather than a policy wonk) in *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism*. The book draws upon the author’s historical work for the commission and brings its analysis up to September 11, 2001. Naftali’s finely crafted narrative, which benefits from the author’s access to former principals as well as classified documents, is more than a chronicle of bureaucratic malaise, strategic shortsightedness and missed diplomatic opportunities—although it is all of this as well. The author’s real contribution is to present the elements of the case that the real shortcomings in American counterterrorism are not so much institutional as conceptual: If anything, the record of the last half-century is that of short-term institutional concerns being addressed, even if at the expense of what should have been overarching considerations.

While America’s confrontation with international terrorism, especially its Middle Eastern variant, dates back to the 1960s, even the foreign policy-minded Nixon Administration seemed to view it at best as a secondary problem whose concerns were subordinated to larger

geopolitical interests. Despite the March 1, 1973, hostage-taking, and later killing, of U.S. Ambassador Cleo Noel and American diplomat George Curtis Moore (along with a Belgian diplomat and two others) in Khartoum, Sudan, by the Palestinian Black September faction (linked to Yasir Arafat), the Nixon Administration established the first official dialogue with the Palestinians. During Gerald Ford's tenure, his advisors largely believed it politically risky for the president to associate himself directly with anti-terrorism activities. That signal was read throughout the administration: When the chair of its own counter-terrorism working group tried to convene a high-level task force on terrorism, he could only lure two deputy assistant secretaries, one from the Transportation Department and one from the Justice Department, to attend. (The Justice Department's representative, interestingly enough, was an associate deputy attorney general named Rudolph Giuliani.)

American counter-terrorism policy likewise sent confusing signals even under Ronald Reagan, who took office determined to redress what he perceived to have been his predecessor's weakness, as exemplified by the humiliating 444-day captivity of the American diplomats taken hostage in Iran. Reagan's 1981 Inaugural Address was, in fact, the first presidential Inaugural Address to mention terrorism specifically. However, in the face of the bombings of the Marine barracks and the U.S. embassy and the hostage taking in Lebanon, the administration demurred. While it is understandable that the president became preoccupied with securing the release of the hostages and the Pentagon's doubts about employing the military to retaliate against Hizballah were not unreasonable, the message that terrorists received was certainly not one of deterrence, much less resistance.

If the two-term Reagan Administration was stymied by concerns about op-

erational success against known perpetrators, the next two-term president, Bill Clinton, proved to be hamstrung when his intelligence advisors were unable to provide him with enough evidence to credibly pin the blame for particular attacks in time to retaliate against the perpetrators before the public's attention span passed. Thus, the suicide bombings against the Khobar Towers at Dhahran Air Base, Saudi Arabia, in 1996 and the USS *Cole* in the port of Aden, Yemen, in 2000 went unpunished—the latter case serving as a less-than-strong message to the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, who were already in the United States planning their own operation.

**F**OREIGN POLICY realists have taken more than their share of hits since the September 11 attacks brought America's decades-long, albeit often ignored, struggle with international terrorism to the shores of the U.S. homeland. Critics from both the Right and the Left have argued that the principles of political realism are hopelessly outdated in the era of transnational terrorist networks, especially those willing to embrace suicide operations. Thus it is argued that the combination of resistance, deterrence and cooperation calibrated on a moral, strategic and economic calculus that worked so successfully against the Soviet menace is inapplicable to the case of an apparently irrational enemy bent on wreaking havoc even at the cost of the perpetrator's certain death. Despite this skepticism, those principles—including, in Hans J. Morgenthau's classic formulation, the existence of objective laws of politics, the significance of interest defined in terms of power, the centrality of the nation-state, the ineluctable tension between the demands of morality and those of successful political action, the suspicion of universalism and the autonomy of the political sphere—nonetheless retain

their validity in the international political sphere today, which, alas, must also account for transnational terrorism and its deadliest form, the suicide attack.

In the end, despite the irrationality of the act of suicide, suicide terrorism as a strategic tool is not incomprehensible, even if the motivations of the individual suicide terrorist are inscrutable. No known suicide bomber has acted alone; whatever his or her background and circumstances, he or she was recruited, indoctrinated and eventually sent out by some organization with a political agenda. Even if one accepts—which Pape and Bloom do not—the widely held view that the suicide terrorist is driven by despair to lash out and is indeed unstoppable, it does not follow that this holds true for those who direct him or her. These architects of terror have certain strategic aims and they are subject to deterrence if the cost of their operations redounds on them in the form of unsustainable damage. Even among the Palestinian population, where support for suicide attacks during the second *intifada* tends to run high, a few intellectuals have begun to question not so much the morality of dispatching the so-called martyrs against Israeli civilians as its effectiveness as a tactic. Sifting through the raw data compiled by Michele K. Esposito in the Winter 2005 issue of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, one wonders what has taken them so long. During the first four years of the *intifada* (September 28, 2000–September 27, 2004), there have been 135 suicide bombings, which have killed at least 501 people and injured at least another 2,823. Meanwhile, during the same period, according to the conservative estimates of the Israeli human rights group B’Tselem, 2,859 Palestinians have been killed, 7,366 others have been detained, and 3,700 homes (including 612 belonging to terrorists or their families) have been demolished. According to the NGO Health Development Information

Project, some 53,000 Palestinians had been injured in conflict-related violence; in contrast, the Israeli Defense Forces report 6,709 Israeli injuries, including 4,711 civilians and 1,998 members of the security forces. So now what if, after five years of hundreds of suicide missions and thousands of “martyrs”, the terrorists are no closer to their objective? Or what if they achieve some short-term and even intermediate gains only to reap few long-term strategic goals and a great deal of self-ruination? Will they be able to sustain the momentum of their deadly campaign? Or will the tried and true instruments of deterrence prevail once more?

In his magisterial *Politics Among Nations* (1948), Morgenthau noted that “it is inevitable that a theory which tries to understand international politics as it actually is and as it ought to be in view of its intrinsic nature, rather than as people would like to see it, must overcome a psychological resistance that most other branches of learning need not face.” What the sage of realism held to be true for international politics in general is certainly applicable to its most barbaric modern articulation, the deliberate attacking of innocent civilians by someone who blows himself or herself up in order to kill the chosen target in furtherance of a strategic political objective. Distilled to this definitional level, suicide terrorism is rendered less inscrutable and more subject to dissection by the traditional toolkit of statecraft. With determination, consistency and force, the right instruments can and must be found to lessen the madness of suicide terrorism by pruning the fruits that make it so attractive. □

---

J. Peter Pham, an assistant professor in the Center for Liberal and Applied Social Sciences at James Madison University, also serves as an academic fellow on terrorism at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and a resident scholar at the Institute for Infrastructure and Information Assurance.