

Suicide Terrorism: Rationalizing the Irrational

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Introduction

The murderous attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon re-awakened the world to the devastating effects of suicide terrorism.[1] Since the attacks on New York and Washington, these apparently random and fanatical acts of violence have swept the globe from Rabat to Islamabad to Jakarta. To date, more than twenty countries have been directly affected by the phenomena of suicide terrorism.[2] Yet, this lethal and deadly form of warfare long predates the events of September 11. Indeed, contrary to popular perceptions, suicide terrorism is neither a recent phenomena nor is it steeped in religious fervour. Similarly, the preponderance to associate suicide terrorism as something that is somehow unique to Islam or the Middle East is wrong; the perpetrators and organizers of suicide bombings transcend all religious and cultural traditions. Suicide terrorism has and continues to be employed by religious and secular groups alike. Its utility is the outcome of crude cost-benefit analysis; representing the most efficient manner a terrorist organization can inflict maximum damage whilst incurring the least cost. Put simply, suicide terrorism represents "value for money"; it is brutally efficient, cheap, and until recently, has been easy to organize. This "strategic logic"[3] and the inherent rationalism of organizations such as al Qaeda, Hamas, and the Tamil Tigers in employing suicide terrorism, underscores that the perpetrators are neither irrational nor crazed individuals.

Suicide Terrorism Then and Now

Human history is replete with acts of martyrdom for political and religious reasons. In the first century A.D., the Zealots and Sicarii, two Jewish sects, attacked the Roman occupiers of Judea and their allies in public places with full knowledge that they would be killed themselves. The Assassins, a cult active in modern Iran and Syria, from the 11th to the 13th centuries killed their targets at close range and with little escape routes, seriously threatening the governments of several states.[4]

In the mid-18th century, other groups carried out suicidal attacks against colonial rule in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Later, at the end of the 19th century, Russian anarchists attacked members and upholders of the Tsarist regime with explosives, killing themselves and their victims. In World War II, Japanese Kamikaze "Divine Wind" pilots participated in suicide attacks against American ships in the Pacific. In the Battle of Okinawa (April 1945), some 2,000 Kamikaze pilots rammed fully fuelled planes into more than 300 ships. 5,000 Americans were killed (alongside the 2000 Kamikaze) in the most costly naval battle in American history. Researchers of the Kamikaze point out that these individuals were not suicidal, but rather viewed self-sacrifice as the ultimate enemy against a powerful enemy.

Over a quarter of a century later, ongoing political stability in the Middle East saw the revival of martyrdom operations. Hizbullah is believed to have been behind the devastating attacks against U.S. and French forces in Lebanon in October 1983, which caused 300 deaths. Indeed, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) seemed to have emulated Hizbullah's tactics with even more brutality. The *New York Times* reported that up until 2002 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have "dispatched more

suicide bombers than anyone in the world," including Hamas, with more than 220 suicide bombs attributed to the organization.[5] The LTTE has directed its attacks primarily against the highest Sri Lankan and Indian political and military personnel. It is the only organization that succeeded in killing two heads of state, former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, and Sri Lankan president Prendesa in 1993.

In Turkey, the Marxist-Nationalist Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) has carried out a total of fourteen suicide attacks against a range of targets. Its campaign started in June 1996 at time when the organization was facing heavy military setbacks in the southeast of the country. Suicide attacks were seen as one way to tilt the playing field in its favor.

So what we can see is that suicide terrorism in all its shades, has been employed for many years, and has intermittently been used by secular and religious groups alike, regardless of ethnic origin. It is an attractive modus operandi to terrorists for a variety of reasons including:

Heavy casualties

Suicide attacks result in many casualties and cause extensive damage. From 1980 to 2001, suicide attacks worldwide reportedly represented only 3 percent of all terrorist attacks but accounted for 48 percent of the total deaths due to terrorism.[6] In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, martyrdom operations carried out between 2000 and 2002 caused about 44 percent of all Israeli casualties, despite only representing 1 percent of the total number of attacks during the period.[7] Underscoring its importance, former Hamas leader Abd al-Aziz Rantisi of Hamas described the attacks as the most important "strategic weapon" of the Palestinian resistance.[8] Another advocate, Dr. Ramadan Shalah, secretary-general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad summarised its utility as follows:

Our enemy possesses the most sophisticated weapons in the world and its army is trained to a very high standard...We have nothing with which to repel the killing and thuggery against us except the weapon of martyrdom. It is easy and costs us only our lives...human bombs cannot be defeated, not even by nuclear bombs.[9]

It remains by and large a weapon of the "weak" vis-à-vis a much stronger and superior enemy. The case of the Kamikaze is illuminating. Japan only started to employ them in November 1944 towards the end of the war when the tide was turning against them.

Media Coverage

The perpetrating organization is able to capitalize on widespread media coverage that the suicide attack attracts. The fate of the bomber or martyr is part of the story, and the large number of victims, again, ensures public attention. Since the gruesome effect of the violence is intended to be impressed upon an audience, the shocking nature of the attack is part of the calculation. The media coverage conveys an image of extreme discipline, dedication, and skill on behalf of the terrorists in carrying out such an audacious and incomprehensible act.[10] This conversely instills a feeling of fear and helplessness amongst the target population in the face of a supposed invisible and unstoppable enemy.

No escape plan required

From an operational perspective, suicide terrorism is appealing, as the terrorist organization doesn't have to plan an escape route, which is often the most complicated part of the plan. There is a great risk of the group being exposed if an individual terrorist is apprehended. Following the Madrid atrocity, when Spanish police raided an apartment block to detain others in connection with the attacks, the four terrorists inside the building blew themselves up, rather than being captured, and having to assist police in their enquiries. Similarly, Tamil Tigers rebels have traditionally carried one cyanide pill, which they can swallow in the event of imminent capture.

Optimum efficiency

An additional tactical advantage of martyrdom operations over conventional terrorist tactics is the guarantee that the attack will be carried out at the most appropriate time and place with regard to the terrorists' objectives. This ensures the maximum number of casualties, which most likely would not be achieved via other means such as the use of a remote controlled charge or timer bomb. Similarly, it is extremely difficult to counter suicide attacks once the terrorist is on way to the target. Even if the terrorist is apprehended, the explosive device can still be detonated.

Cost effectiveness

Suicide attacks are cheap with the bomb ingredients widely available, as they also fill a civilian use. One Palestinian official's prescription for a successful mission includes:

A willing young man...nails, gunpowder, a light switch and a short cable, mercury (readily obtainable from thermometers), acetone...The most expensive item is transportation to an Israeli town. The total cost is about \$150.[11]

Again, underscoring its brutal efficiency, 250 marines were killed by a single suicide bomber in October 1983 in Lebanon, a single driver ploughed his truck into a makeshift army camp in Sri Lanka in 1987, killing 40 soldiers. More recently in Bali, over two hundred tourists died at the hands of two bombers, while on September 11, nearly three thousand died at the hands of just nineteen hijackers. Murder on this scale is unlikely to have been achieved by conventional terrorist means.

Legitimacy and recruitment

Terrorist organisations are able to benefit from the death of a member, conferring a sense of legitimacy on it. The message is one of no going back. The group glorifies the act, infusing a culture of martyrdom that may include posters, songs, and flyers, and in doing so seeks to inspire others to join its ranks. Indeed, even before the bomber has struck, he is in many ways a living martyr. The story of Murad is fairly typical. Before undertaking the martyrdom operation, he was photographed in heroic poses and video recorded himself explaining his reasoning behind becoming a martyr. After these events, Murad wrote letters to his family and friends, explaining to them his aspirations of martyrdom. Merari explains, "There is no return for him without really losing any self-respect, the respect of others, but also because his mental state is already focused on killing himself, on being dead." [12]

This process of conditioning can be found in other groups, too. Typically, members of the LTTE have their last meal with their leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. The Tamil Tigers have gone so far as to actually film some of the suicide attacks for recruitment and motivation.[13] The pervasive use of martyrdom operations amongst the Tamil Tigers have shown that suicide terrorism is not a purely religious phenomenon and "that under certain extreme political and psychological circumstances, secular volunteers are fully capable of martyrdom." [14]

Among Palestinian children, there has been an increased tendency to idolize suicide bombers. A recent report cited 25 percent of Palestinian boys between the ages of 12-17 wanted to become suicide bombers.[15] Dr. Eyad Serraj, a psychiatrist in the Gaza Strip, claims that in the children's minds, the life of a martyr is one of power and glory.

Palestinian society glorifies the martyr. They are elevated to the levels of saints and even prophets. Out of the hopelessness and the inhuman environment they live in, there is the promise that they will have a better life in heaven.[16]

The ensuing retaliation following a suicide bombing also benefits the terrorist organization as it further increases a person's sense of victimization and readiness to behave according to the doctrines and policies of the organization. This radicalization of opinion increases both supply and demand for martyrdom operations. In many cases, Hamas and Islamic Jihad have actually recruited future suicide bombers at the charged processions of funerals and public commemorations.

Market Share

In some cases, the decision to deploy martyrs reflects the organizations competition for market share.[17] Mia Bloom argues that during the deadlock in the peace process in 1996-99, as Palestinian public support for martyrdom operations rose, Hamas and Islamic Jihad sought to increase such attacks to augment their own profiles at the expense of the Palestinian Authority.[18] Martyrdom operations are so ubiquitous that they have become bases of mobilization for the organizations that employ it. Since the second Intifada (September 2000), the number of organizations using the tactic has proliferated. New groups, as well as older groups who previously eschewed the tactic, have become the norm. Secular organizations, the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), the DFLP (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine), and al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (linked to the secular Fatah organization) are now competing with the Islamists to capture the Palestinian imagination. All groups now vie to claim responsibility for the next attack, with the *New York Times* reporting, "Several Palestinians groups rushed forward to claim responsibility for the bus bombing- an indication of the competition among Palestinians for militant credibility." [19] This incident saw at least four organizations separately claim responsibility for the attacks, demonstrative of the competitive nature of the 'martyrdom business'. Human Rights Watch also reported the ascension of suicide bombings by the al Aqsa Brigade as attributable to Fatah's fears that it was losing political ground to the Islamists. "When the al Aqsa Brigades started [martyrdom operations], it was the decisions of all districts...the political leaders feared they would lose their influence in the street." [20]

Financial rewards

Financial rewards for the individual and groups carrying out suicide attacks can also be significant. A Saudi telethon reportedly raised more than \$100 million for the *al-Quds* (Jerusalem) Intifada following a string of suicide attacks against the Israeli occupation. Payments and other benefits have also been given to individual families of dead Palestinian martyrs. Prior to the collapse of the Iraqi regime, Saddam Hussein's Baathist party paid \$10,000-25,000 per martyr in the Palestinian territories, underscoring the institutionalization of suicide bombing.[21] Similarly, the Tamil Tigers receive substantial funds from the 800,000 Tamils living abroad in Australia, Canada, and Europe who have sent as much as \$150 million annually.[22]

The Role of Women

Increasingly, we have seen more women being used for suicide missions. Nationalist groups such as the LTTE, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, and the Kurdish PKK (People Workers Party) have employed women in martyrdom operations. However, it wasn't until 2002 that the Islamic group Hamas first employed a woman. A pragmatic decision in light of the effectiveness of the Israeli security forces identifying suicide bombers.

The popularity of using women in martyrdom operations can be explained by "the gentle sex" attracting less suspicion than men do. Similarly, there is reluctance in many societies to physically search women. In many cases women can often hide explosives while appearing pregnant. Abd al-Rantisi of Hamas echoed these sentiments when he stated, "There is no reason that the perpetration of suicide attacks should be monopolized by men." [23]

Women have participated in about 30-40 percent of the LTTE's overall suicide activities, with a female suicide bomber killed Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. In 1999, another bomber from the

LTTE's specialist suicide brigade, The Black Tigers, blew herself up at an election rally wounding Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and killing twenty-three others. Among the PKK, about two-thirds of the attacks, eleven of fourteen, have been undertaken by women.[24] Female suicide bombers are similarly frequent actors in the Russian-Chechnyan conflict. Aside from the theatre seizure in Moscow, in June 2003 a Chechen female suicide bomber blew herself up on a bus carrying Russian troops to Chechnya, killing sixteen soldiers.[25]

Conclusion

Organizations will continue to employ martyrdom operations in the face of stronger and more powerful enemies. The challenge is to remove the conditions of conflict that foster such acts. Peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil Tigers have seen the cessation of such attacks. However, events in the Middle East remain deeply worrisome. In the absence of a settlement in either Iraq or Palestine, such violence is likely to continue. Unless there is substantial and sustained global engagement that delivers peace and justice, the bloodletting associated with these conflicts will continue to supply groups such as al Qaeda and allies with volunteers prepared for martyrdom.

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1. The most deadly suicide attack until then had been the two bombings against U.S. and French army barracks in Lebanon on October 23, 1983, which killed 241 U.S. marines and 58 French soldiers.
2. These include Afghanistan, Algeria, Chechnya, Croatia, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Russia Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States and Yemen. Although to date suicide terrorism hasn't been employed on the British mainland, I have included the United Kingdom in this list because two Britons were amongst the perpetrators of a suicide bombing, claimed by Hamas in Israel. There is also the recent incident in which the Colombian secret police, the DAS, arrested a guerrilla of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) who had allegedly been setting up a cell of suicide bombers.
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25. For more information on the participation of women in martyrdom operations, see Clara Beyler, "Messengers of Death Female Suicide Bombers," February 12, 2003. Ehud Sprinzak, "Rational Fanatics." Y. Figheh, "Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Female Suicide Bombers," October 6, 2003. Audrey Cronin, *Terrorists and Suicide Attacks*, *CRS Report for Congress*, August 2003: 1-14.

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