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Suicide Attacks Life as a Weapon

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Suicide attacks—the targeted use of self-destructing humans against a perceived enemy for political ends—are a modern method with ancient roots. From as early as the first century AD the Jewish sect of Zealots (sicari) in Roman occupied Judea used suicide as a tactic against their enemies. Suicide attacks in the Middle East can be traced to the early Christian Crusades in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; the Islamic Order of Assassins (also known as Ismailis-Nazari) was actively involved in similar activities. In the late nineteenth century Russian anarchists and nationalist groups used suicide attacks, their preferred method, to destroy and terrorise the enemy because they regarded it as a source of legitimacy for the cause and a rallying point for future recruits.

Suicide attacks were employed by the Japanese when they used kamikaze pilots to attack American forces in the Pacific during World War II. In April 1945 during the Battle of Okinawa, some 2000 kamikazes rammed their fully fuelled fighter planes into more than 300 ships, killing 5000 Americans in the most costly naval battle in the history of the United States². In the mid-twentieth century with the development of better explosives and means of detonating targets, suicide attacks declined in popularity amongst terrorist groups and were replaced by remotely detonated explosives, hostage taking and attacks on airlines. As counter terrorism methods began to improve in the later half of the twentieth century methods of terrorist attacks began to evolve as well.

Suicide attacks in the Middle East

The advent of modern era suicide terrorism arguably began with the attacks on the Iraqi embassy in Beirut in December 1981. In October 1983 the Hezbollah or Party of God, a Lebanese Shiite militant group that has become a major force in Lebanese politics and society, carried out suicide attacks on a US Army base in Beirut, which killed nearly 300 American and French servicemen. This led to the withdrawal of the American and French multinational peacekeeping force in Lebanon making suicide attacks an effective strategic political weapon. By 1985 the use of suicide attacks had succeeded in forcing Israel to abandon most of southern Lebanon.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, suicide attacks began with attacks by Hezbollah trained members of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) aimed at derailing the Oslo Peace Accord. In 1988, PIJ founder Fathi Shiqaqi had formulated the guidelines for “exceptional” martyrdom operations involving suicide attacks. Suicide attacks are now plaguing the occupying forces in Iraq. They are becoming a weapon of choice among the Iraqi resistance groups because of their lethality and media impact. In general, suicide attacks constitute about three percent of all terrorist incidents but account for almost half of the deaths due to terrorism. When the US troops entered an abandoned factory shed in Fallujah, Iraq during their siege of the city on 11 April 2004, they found a large cache of leather belts stuffed with explosives along with bomb making instructions. This is the first time since the thirteenth century that suicide attacks are being employed as a weapon of coercion in Iraq.

The strategic logic of suicide attacks

Why are suicide attacks becoming so frequent and what motivates the perpetrators of such attacks? A groundbreaking study by University of Chicago political scientist Robert Papp has shown that there is lit-

Suicide attacks have increased dramatically in the Middle East over the past year with the war in Iraq and the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This rise in suicide attacks is remarkable given that the total number of terrorist incidents worldwide fell from its peak of 665 in 1986 to 190 in 2003 alone, whereas the incidents of suicide attacks increased from 31 in the 1980s to 98 in 2003¹. There is growing evidence that current American domestic and foreign policies may be further contributing to an acceleration of this trend.

tle connection between religious fundamentalism (and for that matter religion) and suicide attacks. The leading instigator of suicide attacks between 1980 and 2001 were the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, a radical nationalist group whose members were from Hindu families but who were adamantly opposed to religion. Religion is used effectively by the Palestinian radical groups Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades to recruit suicide attackers and to raise operational funds. But the leadership of these organizations has a secular goal: to coerce the Israeli government to change its policies and to leave Palestinian territories. Even if some suicide attackers are irrational or fanatical, the leadership of the groups that recruit and direct them are not.³

Papp's study shows that suicide attacks follow a strategic logic specifically designed to coerce modern liberal democracies to make significant political and territorial concessions. According to Papp, the reason for the rise of suicide attacks over the past two decades is because “terrorists have learned that it pays.” Suicide attacks by members of Hezbollah and Hamas were successful in compelling American and French troops to leave Lebanon in 1983, Israeli forces to leave Lebanon in 1985 and to quit the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1994 and 1995. The Tamil Tigers succeeded in winning major political and territorial concessions from the Sri Lankan government from 1990 onwards using this tactic. In the 1990's suicide attacks by the Kurdistan Peoples Party succeeded in winning partial cultural and political concessions from the Turkish government. The withdrawal of the American troops from Saudi Arabia in 1996, under pressure from terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda supporters, also fit in with this pattern.

Psycho-social factors

Some contemporary commentators have argued that suicide attackers are mentally deranged and crazed cowards who thrive in poverty and ignorance. Such explanations about the psychological profiles and motivations of suicide attackers unfortunately do not help us to either explain the phenomenon or to better understand it. Traditional studies regard suicide attacks as one of the many tactics that terrorists use and thus do not explain the recent rise of this phenomenon. The few studies, which have addressed suicide attacks explicitly, have tended to focus on the suicide attackers' individual motives such as religious indoctrination, especially Islamic fundamentalism, and on their psychopathologies, poverty and lack of education. These explanations have been found to be seriously flawed.

After reviewing psychological studies of suicide attackers, University of Michigan psychologist Scott Atran has concluded that suicide attackers have no appreciable psychological pathologies and are as educated and economically well-off as individuals from the surrounding population. To understand why non-pathological individuals volunteer to become suicide attackers depends on the situational factors which are largely sociological in nature. In the context of the Middle East these include a collective sense of historical injustice, political subservience, and a pervasive sense of social humiliations vis-à-vis global powers and their allies. While one may have some reservations about approaching the issue in the above way, ignoring the causes that contribute to the tactic of suicide bombings risks failing to identify solutions to deal with and overcome it.

Handout
pictures of
Hamas suicide
bombers,
Hebron, 18 May
2003

Image not available online

©REUTERS, 2003

Life as a weapon

If suicide attackers exhibit no psychologically and socially dysfunctional attributes or suicidal symptoms then why do individuals choose to participate in such attacks? Part of the answer to this question lies in what drives humans to suicide. In modern psychiatry and sociology suicide is regarded as an *end*, an exit from adverse social conditions in which the individual feels hopelessly powerless. In my own study of suicide over the past thirty years I have found that suicidal behaviour in a variety of settings may be a means to achieve multiple ends including self-empowerment in the face of powerlessness, redemption in the face of damnation, and honour in the face of humiliations.⁴ The achievement of these multiple ends acts as powerful motivators in many suicides and, in my opinion, is central to a fuller and more meaningful understanding and explanation of contemporary suicide attacks in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Nasra Hassan, a United Nations relief worker in Gaza, interviewed 250 aspiring suicide bombers and their recruiters. She found that none were uneducated, desperately poor, simple-minded, suicidal or depressed. But their social contexts displayed the dynamics of their actions. The potential suicide bombers empowered themselves in the face of powerlessness. According to her respondents, "If our wives and children are not safe from Israeli tanks and rockets, theirs will not be safe from our human bombs." In an interview in his small house on an unpaved lane in a crowded quarter of Gaza the late spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Yassin, told her that martyrdom was a way of redemption: "Love of martyrdom is something deep inside the heart, but these rewards are not in themselves the goal of the martyr. The only aim is to win Allah's satisfaction. That can be done in the simplest and speediest manner by dying in the cause of Allah. And it is Allah who selects martyrs." Humiliation acted as a powerful magnet for recruiting suicide bombers. A senior recruiter told her, "After every massacre, every massive violation of our rights and defilement of our holy places, it is easy for us to sweep the streets for boys who want to do a martyrdom operation."⁵

Since Muslims professing religious motives have perpetrated most suicide attacks over the past two years, including those on 11 September 2001, it may be obvious to conclude that Islamic fundamentalism is the root cause of this phenomenon. This assumption has fuelled the belief that future 11 September type of attacks can only be prevented through liberalization and democratization of Muslim societies. This was a key rationale used by the United States government to mobilize public support for the war in Iraq. Policies based on such an assumption may be fostering the development of domestic and foreign policies in the United States which are likely to worsen the situation.

One indication that this may be happening is reflected in the results of the March 2004 Pew Global Attitudes Survey which showed that in

several Muslim countries (Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan) a majority of respondents thought that the American government was overreacting to terrorism. The respondents also supported suicide bombings by Palestinians against Israel and against Americans and other Westerners in Iraq. The International Institute of Strategic Studies in London has also reported that the war in Iraq has led to an increase in global recruitment for anti-American jihad.

Stemming the tide

What strategies can be used to stem the tide of suicide attacks? The offensive military actions such as better border defences and homeland security and concessions to the groups sponsoring suicide attacks

are not likely to succeed. According to sociologist Kathleen Carley of Carnegie Mellon University, eliminating the central actors with extensive networks and ties with the other cell members actually spurs terrorists to adapt more quickly and is less effective in the long run. Thus assassinations of leaders, a favourite Israeli tactic, may be counter-productive besides causing public revulsion.

Suicide attacks are carried out by community based organizations. Strategies aimed at finding ways to induce communities to abandon such support

may isolate terrorist organizations and curtail their activities. But ultimately those strategies addressing and lessening the grievances and humiliations of populations that give rise to suicide attacks are required for their elimination. Support for suicide attacks is unlikely to diminish without tangible progress in achieving at least some of the fundamental goals that suicide attackers and those supporting them share.

Notes

1. Department of State US, *Patterns of Global Terrorism* 2003 (Washington, DC, 2004).
2. A. Axell and H. Kase, *Kamikaze: Japan's Suicide Gods* (New York: Longman, 2002).
3. R. Papp, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 3.
4. R. Hassan, *A Way of Dying: Suicide in Singapore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); R. Hassan, *Suicide Explained: The Australian Experience* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995).
5. N. Hassan, "Letter from Gaza: An Arsenal of Believers," *The New Yorker* (November 2001): 36-41.

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