

Devising a Theory of Suicide Terror

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This article explains why suicide bombing has been effective in some conflicts while in others it has been rejected or abandoned. What motivates organizations to employ violence, and how does suicide terrorism inflame or respond to public opinion? By understanding the dynamics of suicide bombing, we are better able to devise strategies to combat it.

We can define suicide bombing as violent, politically motivated attacks, carried out in a deliberate state of awareness by a person who blows up himself or herself together with a chosen target. The pre-meditated certain death of the perpetrator is the precondition for the success of the attack,¹ however, suicide bombing is not a uniform phenomenon.² Suicide bombing as a practice encompasses attacks of military targets that are immune via ordinary insurgent tactics, the assassination of prominent leaders (who would ordinarily not be accessible by other means), and the attack of large numbers of civilians – mimicking indiscrimination to create generalized fear. It is important to classify which groups employ suicide terror. These may include states or non-state actors

-- although the majority of groups that perpetrate suicide bombing as a tactic tend to be insurgent/terrorists competing with an established state for predominance and/or control. Insurgent groups engaged in suicide bombing campaigns tend to alternate between different strategies and often vary the tactics listed above with conventional insurgent strategies of warfare.

In order to survive and succeed (i.e., achieve political power), insurgent terrorist groups need to mobilize supporters and maintain their support bases (constituencies) over time. To use Varshney's theory of ethnic mobilization:

Mobilization cannot proceed [without] necessary strategies; coalitions must be formed; the response of the adversary—the state, the opposed ethnic group, the in-group dissenters—must be anticipated. And many would join such mobilization, when it has acquired some momentum and chance of success... The *origins* of ...mobilization are thus rational, and its *evolution* may contain a lot of strategic behavior.³

Constituencies' support for organizations comes in several forms. Rank and file supporters are needed to provide food, safe houses, recruits, and ultimately political power (hence the significance of public opinion). Financial support is needed to buy guns and weapons, remunerate the families of martyrs, engage in philanthropic activities to increase the organizations' influence, or to pay their operatives. In order to raise funds, the insurgents might need the support of external communities, their Diaspora, or foreign patrons.

Insurgent groups that are not financially independent must search for funds either internally or externally. They have two options; extract money from the broader local population or raise the money from a small segment of foreign donors. Extraction, derived largely through taxation or levies, will require the terrorist group to function as a 'state in the making,' and will circumscribe what can and cannot be done and who can

and cannot be killed. The insurgents often provide social services or other benefits to the members of their society to shore up their popularity and increase support. The provision of social services is especially salient when there is little external funding, few weapons from the outside, and the insurgents need to convince the larger population that their cause is just. If the insurgent group is forced to search for money externally from a Diaspora or foreign patron, they might chose tactics that maximize publicity, garner greater attention to their cause and to the group employing the tactic. Thus there are different incentives to resort to suicide bombing, depending from where the majority of funding comes.

Suicide bombing works when it pays. In the war for public support, when the bombings resonate positively with the population that insurgent groups purport to represent, they help the organization mobilize support. If suicide bombing does not resonate among the larger population the tactic will fail. If it is applauded, it will flourish. The pattern that emerges from the case studies is that militant groups are more likely to adopt suicide bombing as a strategy, and the tactic is more likely to resonate positively with the population, after other strategies have been tried and failed.⁴ Roger Petersen refers to this phenomenon as the bias of tactical victories amid strategic losses.⁵

If multiple insurgent groups are competing for public support, bombings will intensify in both scope and number as they become both the litmus test of militancy and the way to mobilize greater numbers of people. When competition is especially intense, multiple organizations have sometimes vied with one another to claim responsibility for a particular bombing and identify the bomber as *their* operative. Such spectacular ‘heroic’ attacks garner increased media attention and organizations vie to claim responsibility for

martyrs. The more spectacular and daring the attack, the more the insurgent organization is able to reap a public relations advantage over its rivals and/or enemies.

This process of outbidding between the groups depends on the domestic politics of the minority group and the state counter terror strategies and responses to the insurgents' violence. The bombings do not occur in a vacuum. In fact, all suicide bombing campaigns coexist with regular insurgent tactics (non-suicidal bombings, shooting ambushes, stabbings, assassinations etc). The organizations that adopt suicide terror do not give up the other tactics but use it as part of a range of strategies in their arsenal against their (real or perceived) enemies.

Suicide terror plays a greater role in ethnic disputes when the perpetrators and victims belong to different groups. Targeting the other side is easier when they belong to a different race, ethnicity, religion, or nation. This follows from some of the theoretical claims made by Chaim Kaufmann who contends that ethnic wars tend to have significantly more violence and atrocities directed against civilians since the key issues revolve around the control of territory rather than political affiliation. Success under such conditions does not rely on winning the "hearts and minds" of the people on the other side.⁶

It is a mistake to assume that only religious groups use suicide terror. Many of the groups engaged in such campaigns are decidedly secular. The differences between the insurgents and the state may be an amalgamation of ethnicity, language and religion. Under conditions of hyper segregation, ideas of *otherness* are easier to promote by the insurgents. It becomes easier to dehumanize people on the other side and perceive them as legitimate targets and appropriate for suicidal attacks.⁷

Suicide terror is less common in ideological wars in which the conflict revolves around party membership or ideological affiliation. Suicide terror, like atrocities in general, is successful against a civilian population when the group employing this tactic is not trying to win over members of the same civilian population to their ideology or beliefs.

The organizations do cost-benefit analyses. Their own community provides needed material, money, recruits and the terrorist organizations require a hospitable environment in order to succeed and survive. There are potential negative *rebound effects* from killing members of your own group. The density of connections between the people and the members of the terrorist groups are more complex within this boundary than across it. This puts constraints on the insurgents as to who can be killed and who should not. The attacks by Al Qaeda in Riyadh and Istanbul in 2003, in which there were significant Muslims casualties, demonstrate that such ‘collateral damage’ is unacceptable to the larger Muslim community and Al Qaeda’s credibility and reputation were harmed and the attacks were repudiated. The attacks might have been perpetrated by local individuals but they were funded from abroad, thus limiting the impact of public opinion.

One exception to the *unacceptability* to killing co-ethnics or co-religionists is when suicide attacks are used against the moderate opposition who challenge the dominance of the terrorist/insurgent group or appear more willing to negotiate with the established “enemy” state.⁸ In the cases of Riyadh and Istanbul, moderate oppositions were not the target of the attacks, rather the violence was used indiscriminately to create a sense of generalized fear among the population and attack symbolic foreign targets.

According to intelligence sources, Al Qaeda is losing the war of public opinion in the Islamic world by targeting Muslim women and children in this fashion.

The public response to the tactical use of suicide bombing depends on the how the tactic is used by the insurgent organizations, against whom, and for what purpose. If suicide terror does not resonate and the domestic environment is antagonistic to it, it will be rejected by the rank and file. Violence will fail to win over the “hearts and minds” of the public, the insurgent group’s goal. If martyrdom is seen as a proper response, they will support suicide terror and it will flourish in this environment. If the opposite is true, acts of suicide terror will only deepen the gap between the insurgents and the masses.⁹ In cases where suicide attacks are considered to be a legitimate military tactic, but the organization targets civilians indiscriminately, the public’s response may not be supportive of the organization. In such circumstances insurgent organizations are highly adaptable and will re-focus actions on military (hard) targets which tend to be more acceptable to a wider audience.

Finally, if the domestic environment is hospitable to violence and suicide terror is overwhelmingly supported because the hatred for the other side is very high, the organization’s use of violence will be unrestrained and the insurgents will not distinguish civilian from military targets. The insurgents will choose targets that have the most impact and are the easiest to reach. This often means civilian rather than military targets.

Sacrifice and risk—when employed on behalf of the group—become valuable virtues, rewarded by social status. Thus, the culture ... transforms individual risk and loss into group status and benefit, ultimately cycling that status back onto the individual. The higher the risk, the higher the status.¹⁰

Why does the general population accept or reject the violence? The explanation is somewhat endogenous to the cases and results from a variety of personal, structural and

organizational issues. However, the interplay of domestic politics and external factors like the ongoing conflict, a 'hurting stalemate' or the counter terror strategies employed by the opposing side all affect the extent to which suicide terror resonates positively among the rank and file.

The cases suggest that heavy handed counter terror strategies might appear effective in the short term, however over time such strategies will inculcate a greater sense of outrage and anger, making a formerly inhospitable environment accepting and approving of mounting violence. This appears to be the trend in Israel and in Chechnya.

We can contrast short term and long term successful strategies. The Israeli counter terror measures appear to stem suicide terror, forced many of the militant operatives underground, and caused them to spend more time eluding capture than perpetrating acts of terror. However, because terrorists live and work among civilians, attacks on terrorist capabilities can be nearly impossible to execute without significant civilian casualties. In the long term, Israel's heavy handed tactics, of targeted assassination, 'preemptive attacks' to root out the terrorists and destruction of their infrastructure tend to inflame Palestinian public opinion and supply continual recruits for Hamas and the Islamic Jihad.¹¹ The outrage is caused by anger for personal losses as well as the symbolic humiliation of their 'representatives'.

Up until the Autumn of 2000, Palestinian support for suicide terror never exceeded one third of the population. Within a few short months, support for suicide terror, including when used against Israeli civilians, reached epidemic proportions. There is empirical support for the connection between support for violence and domestic politics since the espousal of suicide violence varies over time in different countries.

Significantly, the trajectory of support is not fixed as support can decrease (Sri Lanka, Turkey) as well as increase (Chechnya, Palestine) over time.

A growing number of authors are now attempting to explain suicide terrorism via theories of insurgency, offensive realism, as an extreme example of social solidarity, and through econometric approaches of rational choice game modeling. Only a few theorists have synthesized terrorism and theory, arguing that it follows a logical process of collective rationality.¹²

Martha Crenshaw measures the rationality of terrorist organizations by examining whether they were effective in achieving their goals as compared to other strategies of war. She states that, “efficacy is the primary standard by which terrorism is compared with other methods of achieving political goals.”¹³ It appears that suicide terror is rarely, if ever, the strategy of first choice but tends to follow other strategies deemed less effective through the process of trial and error. Crenshaw continues, “Organizations arrive at collective judgments about the relative effectiveness of different strategies...on the basis of observation and experience, as much as on the basis of abstract strategic conceptions derived from ideological assumptions – allowing for social learning.”¹⁴

Consistent with Crenshaw’s argument, suicide terror often makes its appearance in the second iteration of conflict. Thus, it was not present during the first Chechen War, nor was it present in the first Palestinian Intifada, or in the first Kurdish rebellion, or in the first Gulf War (...) even though suicide terror as a strategy predates many of these conflicts and its modern manifestation as a tactic of insurgent groups has existed since 1983. Thus, it is not unreasonable to have expected terrorist organizations engaged in

conflict after 1983 to use suicide terror after it had been so successful in expelling the Americans and French from Lebanon.

As Crenshaw notes, there is a deliberate imitation of tactics through social learning. Terrorist organizations, often because of the high degree of publicity and media attention engendered by spectacular attacks, become familiar with what has worked and what has failed in other contexts. However, Crenshaw's focus does not take into consideration the role of public opinion and domestic politics in shaping the use of violence or the resultant competitive atmosphere which can result -- something that I emphasize.

Robert Pape has argued that suicide terror is a coercive strategy directed externally (against a more powerful enemy) to coerce democratic governments to change their policies and evacuate a *homeland* territory that they control. Pape argues that liberal democracies can be coerced through the use of sufficient violence and the expectation of future violence when the attacks occur in organized campaigns. Although Pape's explanation is useful for understanding how suicide bombing is directed against the external enemy, it glosses over the domestic political dynamics and organizational motivations for outbidding. Pape's model correctly identifies the motivations of nationalist-inspired suicide terrorists; however it does not fully explain why religious groups (with goals beyond territorial demands) might use it.

Pape's focus on democratic countries should be problematized. He argues that suicide bombings work best against democratic regimes (because of access to the media, freedom of movement, and the shock value), however his theory cannot be adequately tested or verified at this point. Although there are cases of terrorists in democracies that

have not employed this tactic, his argument is hard to assess empirically since most non-democratic regimes do not permit opposition, let alone violent opposition that would use suicide terror. In instances when illiberal authoritarian regimes have gone head to head against opposition groups (before their strategies had advanced to include suicide terror,) the groups are eliminated. For example, when the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama voiced opposition and mobilized against the Ba'th regime in Syria, the government's response was to eliminate the Islamic opposition and its geographic base of support.¹⁵

There are definitional issues that emerge with Pape's focus on democracies. The suspension of democratic freedoms and norms in many of the cases, the questionable label of Sri Lanka in the 1980s, Israel in the Occupied Territories and Russians in Chechnya as liberal democratic societies forces us to rethink some of these propositions regarding regime type.

Lastly, Pape's model cannot explain why moderates who share the same ethnicity as the terrorists are targeted because this approach reifies the opposition engaged in suicide terror and cannot give an explanation for the competitive environment that emerges in some cases and not in others – all of which requires an analysis of domestic level variables.

Suicide bombing should be disaggregated into two levels of analysis -- the individual bombers who blow themselves up and the organizations that send them. To varying degrees, both parties (individuals and organizations) are acting rationally in the strictest sense of the term since they are pursuing goals consistent with picking the option they think is best suited to achieve their goals.¹⁶ According to Varshney's understanding

of the rationality of ethnic conflict, these goals are a combination of *value rationality* and *instrumental rationality*.

Instrumental rationality entails a strict cost-benefit calculus with respect to goals, necessitating the abandonment or adjustment of goals if the costs of realizing them are too high. Value-rational behavior is produced by a conscious “ethical, aesthetic, religious or other” belief, “independently of its prospects of success.” Behavior, when driven by such values, can consciously embrace great personal sacrifices.¹⁷

Thus the perpetrators of suicide terror and the organizations that send them are both acting according to two variants of rational calculations and on two levels.¹⁸ The organizations strategically adapt to changing circumstances to maximize their popularity and their ability to influence the “electorate” based on resonance and how tactics are applauded or rejected. This underscores a significant rational calculation -- those terrorist groups that are not rational, and do not adjust to circumstances, will lose support and may cease to exist.¹⁹

My focus on the organizations fits the available evidence from the kamikazes of World War II to most of the Palestinian and other suicide bombers of today. All of whom are first and foremost members of organizations which trains them, selects their targets, buys their explosives, issues orders for when to launch an attack and tries to convince the larger population that their cause is just.

Motivations for Suicide Terror

Individuals

In the terrorists’ society, there must exist a segment of the population that believes in violence or thinks that other strategies have failed. Thus there needs to be some existing level of violence, which has become institutionalized and takes a ‘life of its own.’ The individuals who perpetrate suicide attacks have many social, cultural,

religious, and material incentives. These include spiritual rewards in the afterlife, the guarantee of a place with God for the attackers' families, celebrity, and even cash bonuses. Although some have argued that suicide bombers are coerced, this is not borne out by the evidence. The individuals are in fact subject to intense group pressure to sacrifice for the greater good.

“You can't let it happen that you feel shame—that you are always talking of the struggle but don't make anything of it.” —*Hamas man, Gaza, July 2003.*²⁰

Individuals most easily manipulated for such purposes also tend to be young and impressionable.

The kamikaze (“divine wind”) first used in the battle of the Philippines (November 1944) were young, fairly well educated pilots who understood that pursuing conventional warfare would likely end in defeat...Few believed they were dying for the emperor as a war leader or for military purposes. Rather, the state was apparently able ...to convince the pilots that it was their honor to “die like beautiful falling cherry petals.”²¹

Some individuals appear to be driven by a sense of humiliation or injustice.²²

Some argue, for example, that perceptions regarding the plight of the Palestinian people influence the willingness of young Egyptians, Saudis, Iraqis, and others to participate in suicide attacks.²³ Others appear to be driven by the desire for personal revenge because they have suffered the loss of a loved one. Nicole Argo's interviews of failed suicide bombers in Israeli prisons elucidate the connection between loss and revenge: When asked why they became martyrs or *shahids*, her interviewees responded:

Pictures of dead kids had a major affect on me. Many were killed [right] before me, like my friend [whose body] I had to carry in my own arms...[A]fter the *istishhad* (martyrdom) of a friend of mine, and after the murder of a baby...These two cases made me think that human life is threatened every moment without good cause...without distinction between those [of us] who are soldiers, civilians, adults, or kids...²⁴

Suicide attackers have often been drawn from widows or bereaved siblings who wish to take vengeance for their loved one's violent death. There is an empirical regularity in Chechnya, Palestine and Sri Lanka wherein suicide bombers have lost a family member to the 'unjust state' and feel that their only meaningful response to express their outrage is to perpetrate an act of suicide terror. The loss of the relative might also signal to the insurgent organization that this person is a potential recruit who is unlikely to change their mind at the last minute or defect.²⁵ David Laitin has identified that defection is the biggest strategic problem that the insurgents must guard against in order to succeed.

“Clubs” of a certain type (most easily formed through religious membership) are able to deal with defection ...and to use suicide attacks effectively. Radical religious sects should have an advantage in recruiting suicide attackers if they can design signals of commitment that will distinguish members who have the “right” beliefs from those that will pull out or even defect.²⁶

In Chechnya, the Black Widows are female suicide bombers who have lost a loved one. Widowhood may sever the woman from productive society and/or leave her with a sense of hopelessness, especially in traditional societies. The surviving family members of people tortured to death by the security services have also filled the ranks of suicide bomber volunteers, and human rights abuses by the state only serve to shore up the justifications for violence made by the most extreme organizations. There have been allegations that Tamil women raped by the Sinhalese security services and military at check points join the LTTE as the “Birds of Paradise” unit of female suicide bombers.

From the perspective of the individual attacker, the act of martyrdom in the pursuit of honor may offer an opportunity to impress an audience and be remembered. This symbolic act may be a powerful incentive for individuals who perceive that their

lives have little significance otherwise.²⁷ Jessica Stern has argued that engaging in such activities affords a way out of a life of boredom, poverty, despair and likens becoming a suicide martyr to the Muslim version of “outward bound.”²⁸

Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alan B. Krueger have examined whether financial incentives might motivate Palestinian bombers,²⁹ whereas other authors have discussed how Islam and the heavenly reward awaiting the martyrs (*istishhadis*) in the afterlife explain the phenomenon.³⁰

A longing for religious purity and/or a strong commitment to the welfare of the group may drive individuals to engage in suicide terror. Religious ideology or political culture can be crucial. Suicide attacks in some contexts inspire a self-perpetuating subculture of martyrdom.³¹ Children who grow up in such settings may be subtly indoctrinated into a culture glorifying ultimate sacrifice in the service of the cause against the enemy people or in the service of a cult-like leader such as Villupilai Prabhakaran or Abdullah Öcalan. According to Victor, Palestinian children as young as six (both male and female) report that they want to grow up and become *Istishhadis* – often not yet understanding the full impact of what that means. By the age of 12, they are fully committed and appreciate what becoming a martyr entails.³²

There are two kinds of individuals who become suicide bombers, those people produced by an organization under this subculture and educated outsiders who flock to the organization to volunteer because of personal reasons. These two groups are often comprised of very different kinds of individuals, varying degrees of educational backgrounds, abilities and profiles. It becomes clear that the individual motivations for choosing to become a suicide bomber are multiple and varied and resists mono-causal

explanation. Thus individual bombers might be provoked by any number of overlapping incentives which include both rational and non-rational motives.

Organizations

Regardless of the motivations and calculus of the individual bomber, the terrorist organizations coordinate and direct attacks strategically toward a larger audience. The terrorist organizations adapt to changing political circumstances and are sensitive to the reactions of suicide operations. In each of the cases, the organizations that perpetrated the violence increased or decreased operations in response to the reactions of the larger population.

Flexibility to changing circumstances is not a handicap since there need not be a sustained consistency in the organizations' ideology that use suicide terror. Hamas committed itself at the start of the 1990s not to kill civilians: when the organization reneged on this commitment in 1994, it found ample reasons for justifying the shift.³³ Should Palestinian public support return to the pre-2000 levels, Hamas would likely modify its tactics again.

According to one senior analyst, "Despite its rhetoric, Hamas' primary interest is having and keeping political power. It won't relinquish this for 'ideology'. Most Hamas leaders know very well that they will never push Israel into the sea."³⁴

Although terrorist organizations overwhelmingly claim that violence is a tool of last resort and a sign of desperation, this appears to be the case when state actors engage in suicide terror. Based on anecdotal evidence, states that use suicide terror appear to do so when they are losing military conflicts so decisively that atrocities are a last ditch strategy in the face of certain defeat (e.g., the Kamikaze). However, the number of cases

of states that have engaged in suicide terror is so small that this conditional theoretical statement cannot be falsified. Most suicide terrorism is perpetrated by insurgent opposition groups struggling against an established state. It is used after other strategies have been tried and found wanting but not the last ditch attempt in the face of certain defeat. Thomas Friedman has argued, “Let's be very clear: Palestinians have adopted suicide bombing as a strategic choice, not out of desperation.”³⁵

In several cases, organizations tend toward the use of atrocities when the military conflict has reached a deadlock or hurting stalemate and something shocking is needed to alter the balance between forces (i.e., to tip the balance). Crenshaw confirms this when she writes, “extremists seek a radical change in the status quo.”³⁶

At first blush this might appear contradictory since terrorism is the quintessential “weapon of the weak” and the terrorists claim they are using terror as a last resort, not to end a deadlock. This seeming inconsistency can be summed up as follows: non-state actors tend to resort to atrocities in the second iteration (or more) of conflict after the other strategies exhausted during the previous iterations have failed to yield the desired results, and when faced with a hurting stalemate. At this juncture, atrocities will appear to be a good idea.

Ehud Sprinzak summarized the organizational logic of using suicide terror in the following manner:

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 killing and thuggery against us except the weapon of martyrdom. It is easy and costs us only our lives.... [H]uman bombs cannot be defeated, not even by nuclear bombs.³⁷

However, much of the success of this strategy -- whether it will take root or be rejected -- will depend on the existing domestic political backdrop against which these actions take

place. Sprinzak argues that the institutionalization of suicide terrorism is temporary and conditional: “Leaders who opt for this type of terrorism are usually moved by an intense sense of crisis, a conviction in the effectiveness of this new tactic, endorsement by the religious or ideological establishment, and the enthusiastic support of their community.”³⁸

Ultimately there is a complexity of motivation behind this particular form of violence. But regardless of objectives, it is a form of “contingent violence.” That is to say, the next iteration of violence is shaped by both the reactions of the state and the behavior of the target audiences.³⁹

The highly publicized attacks engaged in by Chechens against Russian civilians have been designed to draw attention to their cause. They have also played a crucial role in shaping the timing and form of the state response. What is less commonly recognized is that the state’s response to terrorism is also targeted at an audience. The actions of the Russian government demonstrate that state counterterrorism can be as consciously directed toward shaping perceptions as are the terrorist attacks to which it responds.⁴⁰

This explains both how suicide terror becomes popular in some cases and why it is rejected or repudiated in others. This logic can be extended to explain the counterfactual cases in which organizations did not resort to suicide bombing (although did engage in insurgency) by examining public reactions to civilian casualties that resulted from conventional bombing campaigns. If civilian casualties were repudiated, the organizations learned that increasing violence against civilians would not be a welcome tactical shift as was the case for the Basque ETA in Spain and the Provisional IRA in Ireland.

Domestic Politics and Public Support

Popular support for suicide bombing depends on who is targeted. Suicide Operations vary along a spectrum that encompasses the targeting of civilians, military personnel and bases, infrastructure and, recently, international organizations and NGOs. The rejection or acceptance of such violence by the larger population (of Palestinians, Kurds, Tamils, Irish Catholics, etc.) depends on what strategies and counter terror moves are made by the opposing side. The larger population will either support the tactic of suicide terror or reject it and make distinctions between the targets: civilian versus military targets, settlers versus civilians located in the area not part of the disputed homeland, men of military age versus women and children.

I do not intend to kill innocent women and children, but to kill Israeli soldiers and all that support them in their mission to: take our lands, to kill us, to plant settlements. These people carry the responsibility for these crimes exactly like the soldier that executes [them]. Therefore we don't kill innocents. But when a kid is being killed, here [in Palestine] or there [in Israel], this is distressing. He is killed incidentally [sic] with no intent. I do not intend to kill children.

-- Preempted bomber, Kele Shikma prison, May 2003⁴¹

Interestingly enough, in several cases, public support shifted in favor of suicide terror (including when used against civilian targets) when the targeted state engaged in specific counter insurgency tactics. Thus relying on 'targeted assassinations' by using helicopter gun-ships increases the chances that civilians will be killed because such tactics are less effective in distinguishing the combatants from non-combatants. If one side's civilians are fair game, the targeted community will believe that civilians on the other side are not sacrosanct.

A thorough study of whether the use of airpower (e.g., helicopter gun-ships) inspires the terrorist group to bring the fighting and death back to the oppressor's doorstep – to make the war real for them again -- would be illustrative (and useful with

regard to US foreign policy in Iraq.)⁴² There is an additional psychological factor for the terrorists: if the enemy state feels safe attacking from above, suicide terror against the enemies' civilians increases the intimacy of the violence. In both Chechnya and among the Palestinians, the Russian and Israeli switch to heavy handed tactics using bombing and helicopter gun-ships in the second Intifada or the second Chechen war correlates with the rise of suicide terror and support for suicide operations among the general civilian population or mass public.

The second Chechen war accompanied with total air bombing and barbarous mop-ups is producing thousands of suicide bombers...After the Nord-Ost ordeal...we should be glad that [suicide attacks] do not happen every day...Since the Khasavyurt agreements, Moscow has followed only one policy – sowing death and making the people hold a referendum and elections. It is the road to a deadlock making Chechens fight in the Palestinian way.⁴³

In contrast to this, Turkey shifted away from its more brutal policies against Kurdish civilians in the Northeast and denial of Kurdish culture and language during the 1990s. After years of repression the Turkish state softened its policies somewhat -- providing carrots as well as sticks to win over Kurdish civilians. The larger Kurdish population repudiated suicide terror when it was used by the PKK in 1996. When other militant Islamic groups used violence against civilians indiscriminately, public reaction was decidedly unsupportive.

Against this backdrop, suicide bombing fails to resonate with the population and did not increase support for the PKK. This shift in state policy, in conjunction with the capture the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, sealed the fate of the organization. Öcalan's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and within a year, he renounced terror and the PKK disbanded. In contrast to this, Turkey's widely publicized (and televised) targeted assassination of Hizb'allah leader, Huseyin Velioglu in 2000, the

organization went underground for a few years and resurfaced as part of the al Qaeda network. The November 2003 attacks in Istanbul have been traced back to Bingol, the center of Hizb'allah activity. Turkey provides a nice contrast of which tactics might have a better long term effect.

Finally, military targets are increasingly difficult to attack over time as states harden these targets and, as a result, civilians become an obvious choice for insurgent groups. It is more difficult to breach the security of a military base or attack a soldier who might be able to defend himself. The PKK has targeted police and state representatives; the LTTE largely targeted politicians or military targets, whereas the Palestinian groups have overwhelmingly and deliberately targeted civilians by attacking shopping malls, buses, discotheques, pizzerias, and locations frequented by teenagers and children. Israeli responses, in addition to the use of helicopter gun-ships, may have exacerbated the violence.

I demonstrate that in several instances when Hamas has seemingly moved away from targeting civilians (albeit temporarily) or has made pronouncements of its intention to do so (e.g., declared a *Hudna* or ceasefire), Israel's response in the form of another 'targeted assassination' of a Palestinian leader provided them the justification to renew attacks against Israeli civilians and certainly mobilized support for the organization.

“We ha[d] a *Hudna*, but two days later they went after Rantisi. I don't like Rantisi—in the first Intifada he tried to kill my brother and I tried to kill him. But after they attempted to shoot him—in the middle of the street as people carried out their day—I can't think these bad things about him anymore.”

– Bomber Interview Gaza City, July 15, 2003.⁴⁴

Thus the fashion in which the state responds to terrorism will have a significant impact on whether suicide bombers *win the hearts and the minds* of the larger population they purport to represent.

In sum, these domestic strategies create the backdrop (receptive or hostile) against which suicide attacks take place. The domestic environment will have an enormous impact on whether it continues to be used, whether it is abandoned, or whether there is an explosion in the number of organizations using suicide terror to mobilize the population and increase their bases of support.

The Goals of Suicide Bombing, Group Competition and Outbidding

Suicide bombing is a tactic of coercive bargaining that includes the possibility outbidding due to the competition between the rival organizations. There are potential incentives for more groups to jump on the suicide bandwagon and engage in greater degrees of violence to distinguish themselves from the crowd.

Outbidding is partially the result of the structural conditions of domestic politics. How many insurgent groups are involved, is one group clearly dominant, or is there a multiplicity of groups engaged in competition to win over a future or emerging electorate? When there is a multiplicity of actors and insurgent groups, outbidding becomes more likely. In cases where one group is clearly dominant, there are fewer incentives to outbid. Suicide bombing is less likely to proliferate and will not become the litmus test against which the organizations and individuals measure themselves.

Often suicide terror is adopted at times when multiple organizations ramped up insurgent violence with increasing degrees of lethality. In cases where there are multiple

groups, violence can become a method to gain credibility and win the public relations competition. In such circumstances, outbidding will result as groups try to distinguish themselves from the crowd and from one another and establish a domestic constituent base. If the domestic popularity of the organization using suicide terror increases we observe an increase in bombings. If the domestic environment supports the use of suicide terror and an insurgent group does not use the tactic, they tend to lose market share. If the group alters its tactics and adopts suicide terror, its popularity can sometimes be resuscitated. The case of the PFLP is illustrative. PFLP leader George Habash repudiated suicide terror for years and refused to engage in such tactics. Support for the PFLP declined significantly and, in 2001, the PFLP began to use suicide terror and the language of *Jihad* and martyrdom. By the time next public opinion poll was taken (within three months), support for the PFLP returned to its former percentage. Since the groups are motivated to win the public relations game, and to win over as many adherents as possible, the tactics that garner them the most support win out.

The question revolves around whether there is a dominant political opposition or whether there is a diffusion of support because no one group has captured the imagination of the people. This reflects a degree of legitimacy (Arafat and Fatah were far more popular before the corruption of the Palestinian Authority became obvious) as well as the extent of coercion used against opponents (Prabhakaran and the LTTE simply kill anyone who defects or joins a different Tamil organization since the LTTE achieved dominance.)⁴⁵

Coercive bargaining is directed at the enemy to coerce them to leave the homeland territory (as Pape rightly points out); the outbidding is directed towards the

domestic population who sponsor, join, support, or ‘vote’ for these organizations. The objectives of suicide bombing are thus multiple and may reinforce or undercut each other depending on specific conditions endogenous to each case. The goals are directed against the international opponent (get out of the “homeland”), against the domestic rivals (to achieve dominance), and/or against a negotiated settlement to which they might not be party (spoil the peace.)

There are indicators that popularity which results from violence is not ingrained and the domestic population can distinguish between killing civilians and military personnel. In some cases, military targets are acceptable but civilian casualties are not. Organizations can recognize this and adapt their strategies accordingly. The LTTE has adapted because of similar constraints.

Recognizing the impact of public opinion opens up different avenues of response for counter terrorism. Counterterrorist policies can be directed at thwarting successful outbidding by the terrorist organizations. The target state could favor factions and not induce support for the militant insurgent groups advocating extreme violence. Thus, where there is a condition of support for suicide bombing, reacting to it harshly directly supports the outbidders’ strategy (as has been the case in Israel and Russia).

The conditions of support must be analyzed carefully. A possible counter terror strategy is to “outbid the outbidders” and engage in policies that incentivize elements of domestic politics that the suicide groups cannot. The ultimate Achilles’ Heel of terrorist organizations is in its overall negative empowerment dynamic (based on desperation or hopelessness). The state can undercut the despair through positive empowerment responses that are divorced from a fundamental refusal to "reward terrorism." You can

reward the community without rewarding the actual terrorists themselves. Notably jailing the leaders rather than killing them through targeted assassination might prove to be a superior strategy and drain the sea in which the insurgents swim by allowing the domestic population to turn away from the terrorist organizations.

An example of this successful strategy is how Algeria managed to outbid the outbidders by separating the terrorists from the larger Algerian public. “It was only then when the people turned against the terrorists that counter terror strategies were effective.”⁴⁶ The targeted state can go over the heads of the terrorists and outbid them to the domestic population. This path would include, for example, Israel pulling out of Palestinian Territories and the Sri Lankan Government negotiating with the LTTE. You outbid the suicide terrorists and return the objective of a negotiated settlement to prominence by giving the public a stake in the process (i.e. something to lose.)

The danger of outbidding has important ramifications for whether policies aimed at democratizing previously authoritarian structures and regimes will have unintended negative consequences. A case in point has been the attempts to democratize Iraq under the American and British occupation. This theory would predict that Iraq is potentially ripe for outbidding. If a central Iraqi authority does not emerge with control over patronage and legitimizing functions, weaker factions will find incentives to outbid and use violence (killing Americans) to gain credibility and popularity. In fact there might be an outbidding dynamic already at play in Iraq as groups vie to become THE opposition faction in Iraq. Indeed there has been a proliferation of suicide bombings since the declared end of the US led war in Iraq in 2003.

Religious versus Nationalist suicide bombers

It is important to distinguish whether the nature of the organizations engaged in suicide terror are religious or nationalistic. Nationalist groups tend to be vying for the control of territory. As Pape points out, their goal is to recapture the *homeland* and rid the area of what it perceives as a foreign occupation. Territory is often divisible. In the game of “outbidding the outbidders,” it is possible to offer the insurgents a negotiated settlement and give the larger community a stake in the process. In Sri Lanka the government understood this and finally, after 19 years of civil war, came to the conclusion that the North and East Coast of Sri Lanka was divisible under a devolution of central powers. The LTTE accepted the model of a negotiated settlement and agreed to autonomy although they had previously assassinated moderate Tamils willing to accept such schemes. Devolution and autonomy were less than the complete independence they initially fought for and yet the LTTE reduced its violence, stopped perpetrating suicide terror and sat down to negotiate with the government.⁴⁷

Religiously inclined groups are more complicated and dangerous negotiating partners. Their ultimate goal may include the spread of religious holy war, to end Evil as interpreted by them, or the pursuit of some heavenly reward. Religious purity as an ideological goal is not divisible and it is thus more difficult to create incentives to deter the terrorists by appealing to the public. Additionally, it appears easier for religious groups to mobilize operatives to commit suicidal violence than it is for secular nationalist groups, and a growing number of religious groups are adapting their strategies and techniques accordingly. According to a Rand survey, religious groups have been far more successful in killing large numbers of people than nationalistic ones.⁴⁸

Barbara Victor argues that some of the secular groups in Palestine had great difficulty mobilizing suicide bombers. Logically, before the Nationalist and Marxist groups switched to suicide bombing tactics, anyone predisposed towards martyrdom already belonged to a religious militant group like Hamas or the Islamic Jihad or aligned with them to volunteer for martyrdom.⁴⁹

The Islamic groups prohibited women's participation and so that was the pool from which the groups drew their new operatives. Victor alleges that this explains why women were finally permitted to participate in martyrdom operations (rather than simply play a supportive role) and the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade was able to emerge onto the scene as a contender by tapping a previously unexploited constituency. However, the groups in question appear highly adaptable. In 2003 the Palestinian Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for two women bombers and Hamas became vaguer regarding its original ideological rejection of women shuhada'a (martyrs).

Finally the issue of capabilities and resources come into play. Terrorist groups that can fund suicide bombing and reward their operatives accordingly can create financial incentives to become martyrs. Organizations that are resource poor might be induced by powerful external actors to jump on the suicide bombing bandwagon if there are financial rewards attached to it (conventional bombing campaigns will not garner the same degree of external support from Hizb'allah or Al Qaeda as suicide terrorism).



Gary Varvel, Indiana -- The Indianapolis Star-News April 15, 2002

If the non state actor or insurgent group must raise money for operations from within the ranks of their own group, a different dynamic comes into play. When the group suffering from the perpetuation of conflict is also funding the conflict, there is a greater likelihood that the general population will grow war weary and exert pressures on the terrorists to abandon military operations and negotiate a settlement. In cases where the money to support the organizations comes from outside the conflict zone, as a form of rent, the terrorist group is less beholden to the will of the people. This war weariness is observable in Sri Lanka whereas it is not observed (yet) among Palestinians – partly because the LTTE has had to resort to domestic taxation, levies, and tolls of the Tamils who reside in Sri Lanka once expatriate financial contributions were complicated by anti-terror laws promulgated after 9/11. Following from Charles Tilly, the LTTE’s reliance upon taxation increasingly transforms the organization into a “state in the making” responsible to its constituency rather than a terrorist organization operating above the

population.⁵⁰ The LTTE has had to be more responsive to the will of the people, their desire for a peace dividend and their opposition to the targeting to civilians. In response, the LTTE has also become more pragmatic and amenable to negotiation.

This final element sheds greater light on potentially more productive counter terror strategies than the heavy-handed approaches preferred by the Russians, Israelis and formerly, the Turks. If terrorist organizations are severely handicapped by the loss of financial support from abroad, and they are forced to rely on internal financial resources which limits the organizations ability to carry on the fight, there is an opportunity for the targeted state to outbid the outbidders by providing the civilian population with the material benefits, infrastructure and autonomy that would erode the insurgents' support base. If the terrorist leader can be captured, imprisoned and made to denounce his/her organization this is a proven effective strategy. The loss of leadership in this fashion appears to take the steam out of the organization, (e.g. Öcalan in Turkey and Guzman in Peru.) Capturing the leader alive has been elusive in Sri Lanka (notably, Prabhakaran wears a cyanide capsule around their neck to prevent this from happening⁵¹).

In contrast to this, killing terrorist leaders appears to serve the purposes of the outbidders, creates nationalist myths, martyrs, and cult of personalities. Among the Palestinians, Israelis has tended to prefer a policy of targeted assassination (although they have tried and failed to kill Sheikh Yassin or Dr. Abdel Al Rantisi), since they rightly assume that to capture them alive would be very costly in terms of Israeli life. In Turkey, the assassination of Hizb'allah's Huseyin Velioglu might have been a factor in the rise of suicide terror in Turkey in 2003. The strategy of killing a leader, rather than imprisoning him and making him renounce violence, has yet to be proven productive in the long term

since new groups or units emerge among the terrorists named after the slain martyr who becomes a symbol and source of inspiration and emulation.

There are no easy solutions to the problem of suicide terror. The first step is understanding the complexity of motivations, the processes and suggest possible alternative policies to combating suicide terror and making it less effective and less popular.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ “Suicide Bombings: The Ultimate Weapon?” Yoram Schweitzer, Institute for Counter Terrorism (ICT) website (www.ict.org.il) August 7, 2001.
- ² I am grateful for Martha Crenshaw’s observations regarding the need to create a typology of suicide terror. Discussions with the author, November 6, 2003.
- ³ Ashutosh Varshney, “Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Rationality.” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 1 no. 1, March 2003, pp.86.
- ⁴ *Resonance* can result from desperation (after other strategies have failed) or because of intense outrage (hatred of “the other” because of their actions-- real or perceived.)
- ⁵ Roger Dale Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- ⁶ Chaim Kaufmann, “Intervention in Ethnic and Ideological Civil Wars: Why One Can Be Done and the Other Can’t,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Autumn 1996, 62–100; Chaim Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Spring 1996, 136–175; and Chaim Kaufmann, “When All Else Fails: Ethnic Population Transfers and Partitions in the Twentieth Century,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Fall 1998, 120–156.
- ⁷ I am grateful to Jeff Goodwin for this observation.
- ⁸ For example both the LTTE and Palestinian militants have targeted moderates for assassination.
- ⁹ Fareed Zakaria cogently identified how in Turkey, PKK suicide terror was repudiated by the population and then abandoned as a tactic. “Suicide Bombings Can Be Stopped.” Fareed Zakaria. MSN op ed, <http://www.msnbc.com/news/953555.asp> August 2003 www.fareedzakaria.com.
- ¹⁰ Nicole Argo, “The Banality of Evil, Understanding Today’s Human Bombs,” Policy Paper, Preventive Defense Project, Stanford University, 2003.
- ¹¹ Some analysts consider them provocations. Stephen David considers this among various viewpoints in “Fatal Choices,” Policy Paper, The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2002.
- ¹² Martha Crenshaw, Ted Robert Gurr, and Robert A. Pape have all integrated terrorism and/or suicide bombing into larger theories of International Relations, combining theory with an attention to detail that stays true to the empirical realities of their cases. Martha Crenshaw, “The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice.” In Walter Reich (ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 7-24, Ted Robert Gurr, “Terrorism in Democracies: Its Social and Political Bases,” in Reich op.cit., 86-102 and Robert A. Pape, “Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” *APSR* vol.97, no. 3 August 2003, 343-361. Andrew Kydd and Barbara F. Walter have also published a theoretical article on suicide bombing, see “Sabotaging the Peace: the Politics of Extremist Violence.” *International Organizations* no.56 vol. 2 Spring 2002.
- ¹³ Crenshaw, 8.
- ¹⁴ Crenshaw, 8.
- ¹⁵ Syrian President, Hafez al Assad destroyed Hama on February 2nd, 1982. See Scott Peterson, “How Syria’s Brutal Past Colors its Future” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 20, 2000.
- ¹⁶ Jerrold Post, “The Mind of the Terrorist: Individual and Group Psychology of Terrorist Behavior,” testimony prepared for the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, Senate Armed Service Committee, 15 November 2001, Ehud Sprinzak, “Rational Fanatics,” *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2000, 66-73 and Martha Crenshaw, “The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice.” In Walter Reich (ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 10.
- ¹⁷ Ashutosh Varshney, “Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Rationality.” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 1 no. 1, March 2003, pp.85-86.
- ¹⁸ The terrorist organizations are able to effectively manage the individuals' value rationality by providing a means to increasing self-esteem and life-meaning (though at the cost of a short life).
- ¹⁹ Rationality, however, is not a guarantee of success.
- ²⁰ Argo, op.cit.
- ²¹ Scott Atran, *Science*, op.cit., 1535
- ²² This is the main argument of Jessica Stern’s, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*. NY: Harper Collins, 2003.

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- ²³ Tim Golden, "Young Egyptians Hearing Calls of 'Martyrdom' For Palestinian Cause," *The New York Times International*, 26 April 2002, p. A1.
- ²⁴ Nicole Argo, *Banality of Evil*, *op.cit.*
- ²⁵ I am grateful to Elizabeth Wood for this observation.
- ²⁶ Eli Berman and David Laitin, *Rational Martyrs: Evidence from Data on Suicide Attacks*. ISERP Paper, Contentious Politics Seminar, http://www.iserp.columbia.edu/news/calendars/contentious_politics.html
- ²⁷ Crenshaw, 26 see also Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*. NY: Roedale Press, 2003.
- ²⁸ Stern, *op.cit.* 5. "Outward Bound" is a program of adventure education for young adults that emphasize growth through foreign experiences and challenges.
- ²⁹ Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malekova, "Education, Poverty, Political Violence and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" Princeton University Working paper, July 2002 and David Plotz, "The Logic of Assassination: Why Israeli Murders and Palestinian Suicide Bombings makes Sense." *Slate Magazine*, Friday August 21, 2001.
- ³⁰ Simon Haddad and Hilal Khashan, "Accounting for Palestinian Perspectives on Suicide Bombings: Religious Militancy, Poverty, and Personal Attributions." Unpublished manuscript no date.
- ³¹ David Brooks, "The Culture of Martyrdom," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 289, No. 6 (June 2002), 18-20.
- ³² Barbara Victor, Interview with the author, October 24, 2003 see also *An Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*. NY: Rodale Press, 2003.
- ³³ Hala Hroub, *Hamas*, 245-249.
- ³⁴ Paul Pillar, Interview with the author, *op.cit.*
- ³⁵ *New York Times*, March 31, 2002.
- ³⁶ Crenshaw, 10.
- ³⁷ Ehud Sprinzak, "Rational Fanatics" quoting "Dr. Ramadan Shalah, secretary-general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. *Foreign Policy*, *op.cit.*
- ³⁸ Sprinzak, *op.cit.*
- ³⁹ I am indebted to Richard Harknett for the theorization of the model. For a discussion of non-contingent violence see his article, "Barbarians At and Behind the Gates: The Loss of Contingency and the Search for Homeland Security," *The Forum: A Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics*, 1, no.2 (Fall 2002): 1-12. www.bepress.com/forum/vol1/iss2/art1
- ⁴⁰ Audrey Cronin, "Studies in Counter Terrorism: Russia and Chechnya." In Art and Richardson, *op.cit. forthcoming.*
- ⁴¹ Argo, *op.cit.*
- ⁴² Although beyond the scope of this present study, a project regarding the effects of counter terror strategies could be undertaken in the future to test which military tactics are most efficient.
- ⁴³ Iya Milstein, "A Female Suicide Bomber is more Dangerous than a Nuclear Power." *Gazeta*, October 2003.
- ⁴⁴ Argo, *op.cit.*
- ⁴⁵ Suicide terror became the dominant strategy in Sri Lanka under conditions of outbidding. Once the LTTE eliminated most of its domestic opposition, it became more amenable to negotiations and moderated its demands.
- ⁴⁶ Mr. Abdallah Baali, Representative, Permanent Mission of Algeria to the U.N, Interview with the author, November 13, 2003.
- ⁴⁷ The adjournment of democracy in Sri Lanka by President Chandrika Kumaratunga in November 2003, suspension of Parliament, and military reoccupation of the capital is a step in the wrong direction and may prove disastrous for the negotiations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government. This work posits that only solution to end suicide bombing is to appeal to the rank and file, offer an alternative solution, and negotiate to avoid an endless spiral of violence.
- ⁴⁸ If the instance of 9/11 is excluded then both types of groups have fairly equal degrees of lethality. Hoffman and Rand identify the religious based groups as dominant and increasing while nationalist groups appear to be receding.
- ⁴⁹ Several secular suicide bombers joined religious groups to volunteer for martyrdom operations. Nicole Argo, Interview with the author, November 23, 2003.

⁵⁰ Charles Tilly, *Coercion Capital and European States AD 990 – 1992*. NY: Blackwell, 1992. See also “War-making and State-making as Organized Crime” in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (eds.), *Bringing the State Back In*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1985 pp.169-191.

⁵¹ Allistair Lawson, “The Enigma of Prabhakaran” BBC News, November 25, 2003.