Rational Fanatics

What makes suicide bombers tick? While most of the world sees them as lone zealots, they are, in fact, pawns of large terrorist networks that wage calculated psychological warfare. Contrary to popular belief, suicide bombers can be stopped—but only if governments pay more attention to their methods and motivations. | By Ehud Sprinzak

October 23, 1983, was one of the most horrific days in the history of modern terrorism. Two massive explosions destroyed the barracks of the U.S. and French contingents of the multinational peacekeeping force in Beirut, Lebanon, killing 241 American servicemen and 58 French paratroopers. Both explosions were carried out by Muslim extremists who drove to the heart of the target area and detonated bombs with no intention of escaping. Subsequent suicide attacks against Israeli and U.S. targets in Lebanon and Kuwait made it clear that a new type of killing had entered the repertoire of modern terrorism: a suicide operation in which the success of the attack depends on the death of the perpetrator.

This tactic stunned security experts. Two centuries of experience suggested that terrorists, though ready to risk their lives, wished to live after the terrorist act in order to benefit from its accomplishments. But this new terrorism defied that belief. It seemed qualitatively different, appearing almost supernatural, extremely lethal, and impossible to stop. Within six months, French and U.S. Presidents François Mitterrand and Ronald Reagan pulled their troops out of Lebanon—a tacit admission that the new terrorism rendered all known counterterrorist measures useless. Government officials erected concrete barriers around the White House and sealed the Pentagon’s underground bus tunnels. Nobody was reassured. As Time magazine skeptically observed in 1983: “No security expert thinks such defensive measures will stop a determined Islamic terrorist who expects to join Allah by killing some Americans.”

Whereas the press lost no time in labeling these bombers irrational zealots, terrorism specialists offered a more nuanced appraisal, arguing that suicide terrorism has inherent tactical advantages over “conventional” terrorism: It is a simple and low-cost operation (requiring no escape routes or complicated rescue operations); it guarantees mass casualties and extensive damage (since the suicide bomber can choose the exact time, location, and circumstances of...
the attack); there is no fear that interrogated terrorists will surrender important information (because their deaths are certain); and it has an immense impact on the public and the media (due to the overwhelming sense of helplessness). Dr. Ramadan Shalah, secretary-general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, summarized the chilling logic of the new terror tactic: "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... human bombs cannot be defeated, not even by nuclear bombs."

The prevalence of suicide terrorism during the last two decades testifies to its gruesome effectiveness [see table on opposite page]. It has formed a vital part of several terror campaigns, including Hezbollah's successful operation against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the mid-1980s, the 1994-96 Hamas bus bombings aimed at stopping the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the 1995-99 Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) struggle against Turkey. The formation of special suicide units within the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) army in Sri Lanka has added an atrocious dimension to the civil war on that devastated island. In addition to killing hundreds of civilians, soldiers, and high-ranking officers since 1987, LTTE suicide terrorists have assassinated two heads of state: Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India in 1991 and President Ranasinghe Premadasa of Sri Lanka in 1993. Sri Lanka's current president, Chandrika Kumaratunga, recently lost sight in one eye following an assassination attempt that killed at least 24 people. The simultaneous 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which took the lives of nearly 300 civilians, were a brutal reprise of the 1983 tragedies in Lebanon.

Almost 20 years after its stunning modern debut, suicide terrorism continues to carry the image of the "ultimate" terror weapon. But is this tactic as unstoppable as it seems? The experiences of the last two decades have yielded important insights into the true nature of suicide bombers—insights that demystify their motivations and strategies, expose their vulnerabilities, and suggest ways to defeat what a senior State Department official once called a "frightening" problem to which there are "no answers."

AVERAGE, EVERYDAY MARTYRS

A long view of history reveals that suicide terrorism existed many years before "truck bombs" became part of the global vernacular. As early as the 11th century, the Assassins, Muslim fighters living in northern Persia, adopted suicide terrorism as a strategy to advance the cause of Islam. In the 18th century the Muslim communities of the Malabar Coast in India, Atjeh in Sumatra, and Mindanao and Sulu in the southern Philippines resorted to suicide attacks when faced with European colonial repression. These perpetrators never perceived their deaths as suicide. Rather, they saw them as acts of martyrdom in the name of the community and for the glory of God.

Moreover, suicide terrorism, both ancient and modern, is not merely the product of religious fervor, Islamic or otherwise. Martha Crenshaw, a leading terrorism scholar at Wesleyan University, argues that the mind-set of a suicide bomber is no different from those of Tibetan self-immolators, Irish political prisoners ready to die in a hunger strike, or dedicated terrorists worldwide who wish to live after an operation but know their chances of survival are negligible. Seen in this light, suicide terrorism loses its demonic uniqueness. It is merely one type of martyrdom venerated by certain cultures or religious traditions but rejected by others who favor different modes of supreme sacrifice.

Acts of martyrdom vary not only by culture, but also by specific circumstances. Tel Aviv University psychologist Ariel Merari has conducted the most comprehensive study of individuals who commit acts of suicide terrorism. After profiling more than 50 Muslim suicide bombers serving in Hezbollah, Amal, and secular pro-Syrian organizations in Lebanon, as well as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Israel, he concluded that there is no single psychological or demographic profile of suicide terrorists. His findings suggest that intense struggles produce several types of people with the potential willingness to sacrifice themselves for a cause [see sidebar on page 70]. Furthermore, Merari maintains that no organization can create a person's basic readiness to die. The task of recruiters is not to produce but rather to identify this predisposition in candidates and reinforce it.
Recruiters will often exploit religious beliefs when indoctrinating would-be bombers, using their subjects' faith in a reward in paradise to strengthen and solidify preexisting sacrificial motives. But other powerful motives reinforce tendencies toward martyrdom, including patriotism, hatred of the enemy, and a profound sense of victimization.

Since suicide terrorism is an organizational phenomenon, the struggle against it cannot be conducted on an individual level. Although profiling suicide bombers may be a fascinating academic challenge, it is less relevant in the real-world struggle against them than understanding the modus operandi and mind-set of terrorist leaders who would never consider killing themselves, but opt for suicide terrorism as a result of cold reasoning.

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF A SUICIDE BOMBER

A suicide terrorist is almost always the last link in a long organizational chain that involves numerous actors. Once the decision to launch a suicide attack has been made, its implementation requires at least six separate operations: target selection, intelligence gathering, recruitment, physical and "spiritual" training, preparation of explosives, and transportation of the suicide bombers to the target area. Such a mission often involves dozens of terrorists and accomplices who have no intention of committing suicide, but without whom no suicide operation could take place.

A careful survey of all the organizations that have resorted to suicide terrorism since 1983 suggests that the most meaningful distinction among them involves the degree to which suicide bombing is institutionalized. At the simplest level are groups that neither practice suicide terrorism on a regular basis nor approve of its use as a tactic. Local members or affiliates of such organizations, however, may initiate it on their own for a variety of reasons, such as imitating the glorious acts of others, responding to a perception of enormous humiliation and distress, avenging the murder of comrades and relatives, or being presented with a special opportunity to strike.

Within such a context, it is important to take into account what might be called "pre-suicide terrorism." Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad suicide operations in Israel during the 1990s were preceded by a wave of knifings in the late 1980s. These attackers never planned an escape route and were often killed on the spot. The knifings did not involve any known organization and were mostly spontaneous. But they expressed a collective mood among young Palestinians of jihad (holy war) against Israel that helped create an atmosphere for the institutionalized suicide terrorism of the next decade.

Many terrorist groups are skeptical of suicide terrorism's strategic value but resort to this tactic in exceptional circumstances. Within this category are the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (allegedly executed by Osama bin Laden's Qaida organization) and similar irregular attacks conducted over the years by the Egyptian Islamic Group, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Kurdish Workers' Party, and the Algerian Armed Islamic Group, among others. Such suicide bombings, though carefully planned, are irregular and unsystematic.

At another level are groups that formally adopt suicide terrorism as a temporary strategy. The leaders...
of these movements obtain (or grant) ideological or theological legitimization for its use, recruit and train volunteers, and then send them into action with a specific objective in mind. The most spectacular operations of Hezbollah between 1983 and 1985, of Hamas between 1994 and 1996, and of the PKK between 1995 and 1999 fall within this category. More recently, Chechen rebels suddenly launched a campaign of suicide bombings following nine months of inconclusive fighting against the Russian military; one of the first bombers, a cousin of noted rebel leader Arbi Barayev, had reportedly declared: “I am going willingly to my death in the name of Allah and the freedom of the Chechen people.”

In such cases, the institutionalization of suicide terrorism has been 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. At the same time, they are fully aware of the changeable nature of these conditions and of the potential costs associated with suicide terrorism (such as devastating military retaliation). They consequently have little difficulty in suspending suicide bombing or calling it off entirely.

A case in point is Hezbollah’s decision to begin suicide bombings in 1983. It is known today that several leaders of the organization were extremely uneasy about the practice. Insisting that Islam does not approve of believers taking their own lives, clerics such as Sheikh Fadlallah raised legal objections and were unwilling to allow the use of this new tactic. However, suicide terrorism became so effective in driving foreigners out of Lebanon that there was no motivation to stop it. The result was theological hair splitting that characterized suicide bombers as exceptional soldiers who risked their lives in a holy war. But following the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 1985 and the decreasing effectiveness of this tactic, Hezbollah’s clerics ordered the end of systematic suicide bombing. The organization’s fighters were instructed to protect their lives and continue the struggle against the Zionists through conventional guerrilla methods. Only rarely, and on an irregular basis, has Hezbollah allowed suicide bombing since.

It is not exactly clear when the commanders of Hamas decided to turn their anti-Israel suicide attacks into a strategic struggle against the peace process. Their campaign, started haphazardly in 1992 against Israeli military and settler targets in the occupied

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**Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Bomber**

What sort of person is willing to become a suicide terrorist? Psychological profiles reveal that the personalities of suicide bombers are as varied as the causes for which they fight:

- Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad use *shahids* (martyrs) in their campaign to destroy Israel and replace it with an Islamic Palestinian state. Boaz Ganor, director of Israel’s International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, characterizes the typical *shahid* as a male, religious, unmarried, and unemployed high school graduate between the ages of 18 and 27. Many have had a relative or close friend killed, injured, or brutalized by the Israelis. Ganor observes that *shahids* do not volunteer, but rather are identified and recommended by their religious teachers. Once skilled field officers have selected and recruited the *shahids*, they begin a highly regimented process of mental purification and military preparation. The suicide candidates are also showered with rewards that help cement their sacrificial dedication. Often coming from a modest social background, most of them know that the suicide act will instantly upgrade their social status—and that of their families. (Indeed, the *shahid’s* family is consistently awarded honors and praises and often receives a generous sum of money.) The martyr himself is guaranteed eternal life in paradise.

- The Black Tigers are the suicide battalions of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has waged an armed conflict against the Sri Lankan government since 1976 in hopes of establishing an independent Tamil state. Similar to the Palestinian *shahids*, Black Tiger recruits tend to be young, unemployed, and unmarried. However, they are not trained to become mere “human bombs.” According to Rohan Gunaratna of Saint Andrews University, male and female volunteers come from the
territories, failed to produce glaring results. The 1994 Hebron Massacre, when Israeli doctor Baruch Goldstein murdered 29 praying Palestinians, changed everything. Determined to avenge the deaths of their countrymen, Hamas operators resorted to suicide bus bombings inside Israeli cities. In a matter of weeks, the new wave of terrorism had eroded Israel's collective confidence in the peace process and had played right into the hands of extremist Hamas clerics who opposed negotiations with Israel. Yet, in 1995 these attacks suddenly came to a complete halt. Several factors convinced Hamas leaders to back off: the growing Palestinian resentment against the costs of the bus bombings (expressed in massive Israeli economic sanctions), the increasing cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security services, and the effectiveness of Israeli counterterrorism.

Ironically, Israel unintentionally pushed the organization to resume the bus bombings when, in 1996, then Prime Minister Shimon Peres ordered the assassination of Yehiya Ayash (known as “the Engineer”)—a Hamas operative who masterminded many of the previous suicide bombings. Humiliated and angered, Hamas temporarily resumed bus bombings in Israel. A series of three successful attacks by Hamas and one by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad changed Israel's political mood about the peace process and led to the 1996 electoral defeat of Peres and his pro-peace government.

In the cases of Hezbollah and Hamas, no permanent suicide units were formed, and bombers were recruited and trained on an ad hoc, conditional basis. But, in rare instances, some organizations adopt suicide terrorism as a legitimate and permanent strategy, harkening back to the Japanese kamikaze pilots of the Second World War. Currently, the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers are the only example of this phenomenon. The “Black Tigers” launched their first attack in July 1987, and since then suicide bombings have become an enduring feature of the LTTE’s ruthless struggle. During the last 13 years, 171 attacks have killed hundreds of civilians and soldiers and wounded thousands more. The assassinations of two heads of state, political leaders, and high-ranking military officers have made it clear that no politician or public figure is immune to these attacks.

The Black Tigers constitute the most significant proof that suicide terrorism is not merely a religious phenomenon and that under certain extreme political and psychological circumstances secular volunteers are fully capable of martyrdom. The Tamil suicide bombers are not the product of a religious cult, but rather a cult organization’s toughest combat battalions and must bring with them a superb fighting record. The LTTE has fully integrated its suicide units with the organization’s secular nationalist army, whose recruitment process employs neither religious rites nor clerical oversight. Just like other LTTE fighters, members of suicide squads are socialized into a culture of supreme sacrifice that glorifies death in action and reverses a long list of dead heroes. The recruitment process involves a tough military program aimed at selecting the most able and devoted soldiers. Although designated to die in kamikaze-like attacks, many of these volunteers are often called upon to carry out sophisticated commando operations that do not require suicide.

Between 1995 and 1999, 15 individuals conducted suicide bombings on behalf of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which seeks to create an independent Kurdish state in southeastern Turkey. All but four of these perpetrators were young women. According to Dogu Ergil of Ankara University, these female suicide bombers were between the ages of 17 and 27, possessed no professional skills, generally came from large, poor families, and in some cases had lost relatives and loved ones in the struggle against Turkey. Coming from a rural traditional society that discriminates against women, most of the volunteers appear to have been motivated by a combination of devotion to PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and the communal prestige bestowed on them as a result of their supreme sacrifice.

The PKK preferred female bombers because they could easily equip them with explosives and dress them to appear pregnant—thereby reducing the chance that they would be frisked by male police officers and soldiers. Also, according to captured PKK members, suicide missions were an effective means of “thinning their ranks” since women were not always able to keep up with the men in the treks across the mountains of southeastern Turkey. The suicide bombings reached their peak following the arrest of Ocalan in February 1999, but stopped five months later when it had become clear that he would not be sentenced to death. —E.S.
of personality: Velupillai Prabhakaran, the brutal and charismatic LTTE leader who initiated the practice, appears to have been greatly influenced by the spectacular successes of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Fiercely determined to fight the repressive Sinhalese government until the Tamils achieve independence, Prabhakaran created the suicide units largely by the strength of his personality and his unlimited control of the organization.

The formation of the Black Tigers was greatly facilitated by an early practice of the organization's members: Since the early 1980s, all LTTE fighters—male and female alike—have been required to carry potassium cyanide capsules. A standard LTTE order makes it unequivocally clear that soldiers are to consume the capsule's contents if capture is imminent. The LTTE suicide units are essentially an extension of the organization's general culture of supreme martyrdom; the passage from ordinary combat soldier to suicide bomber is a short and tragic journey.

MAKING SUICIDE TERRORISTS PAY

The perceived strength of suicide bombers is that they are lone, irrational fanatics who cannot be deterred. The actual weakness of suicide bombers is that they are nothing more than the instruments of terrorist leaders who expect their organizations to gain tangible benefits from this shocking tactic. The key to countering suicide bombers, therefore, is to make terrorist organizations aware that this decision will incur painful costs. While no simple formula for countering suicide terrorism exists, the experiences of the last two decades suggest two complementary political and operational strategies.

Organizations only implement suicide terrorism systematically if their community (and, in some cases, a foreign client state) approves of its use. Thus, political and economic sanctions against the terrorists' community, combined with effective coercive diplomacy against their foreign patrons, may help reduce or end suicide terrorism. The problem with political counterterrorism, however, is that it takes a long time to implement and the results are never certain. The Taliban in Afghanistan, for instance, continue to host Osama bin Laden (who was indicted by the United States in November 1998 for the bombings of the two U.S. embassies in East Africa) despite international sanctions, a unanimously adopted United Nations Security Council Resolution demanding that he stand trial, and a threat from the United States that the Taliban will be held responsible for any terrorist acts undertaken while Bin Laden is under their protection.

The leaders of organizations that resort to suicide terrorism are evidently ready to take great risks. Consequently, the political battle against suicide bombers must always be enhanced by an aggressive operational campaign. Governments do not have to invent entirely new tactics when waging a war against suicide terrorists. Instead, they must adapt and intensify existing counterterrorism strategies to exploit the vulnerabilities of suicide bombers.

The Achilles' heel of suicide terrorists is that they are part of a large, operational infrastructure. It may not be possible to profile and apprehend would-be suicide bombers, but once it has been established that an organization has resolved to use suicide terrorism, security services can strike against the commanders and field officers who recruit and train the assailants and then plan the attacks. This counterterrorism effort calls for the formation of effective networks of informers, the constant monitoring of potential collaborators, and close cooperation among international intelligence services. Counterterrorist operatives must apply consistent pressure on the terrorist infrastructure through harassment and attacks. They must also seek ways to cut off the terrorists' sources of funding by depriving organizations of their financial resources (such as international bank accounts or "front" businesses). Regardless of the presence or absence of hard evidence for planned operations, it is essential to put potential terrorists on the run.

The physical protection of potential target areas is another essential tactic. The idea of erecting concrete barriers against a martyr driving a truck loaded with tons of explosives might strike some as ludicrously inadequate. But such physical protection serves two essential objectives: It reduces the effect of the suicide bombing if and when the terrorist hits the target area, and it serves as a deterrent against potential suicide strikes. For the terrorist field officers, who may never know when they will be caught or killed, each suicide squad is precious. When faced with highly protected areas, they are unlikely to send squads into action. Roadblocks, guards at special checkpoints, inspection teams in public places, and the use of dogs and artificial sniffing devices may drive suicide terrorism down significantly.

Such security measures also reassure the public. Governments must never forget that terrorism constitutes a form of psychological warfare, and that suicide terrorism is the ultimate expression of this struggle. Terrorism must always be fought psychologically—a battle that often takes place in the minds of ordinary people. Even if governments do not have an immediate operational solution to suicide terrorism, they must convince their citizens that they are not sitting
ducks and that the authorities are doing everything they can to protect them. Ordinary people should, in fact, be informed that psychological warfare is being waged against them. Free people who are told that they are being subjected to psychological manipulation are likely to develop strong terrorism antibodies.

In fighting suicide bombers, it is important not to succumb to the idea that they are ready to do anything and lose everything. This is the same sort of simplistic reasoning that has fueled the widespread hysteria over terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The perception that terrorists are undeterable fanatics who are willing to kill millions indiscriminately just to sow fear and chaos belies the reality that they are cold, rational killers who employ violence to achieve specific political objectives. Whereas the threat of WMD terrorism is little more than overheated rhetoric, suicide bombing remains a devastating form of terrorism whose complete demise is unlikely in the 21st century. The ongoing political instability in the Middle East, Russia, and South Asia—including Iran, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and possibly India and Pakistan—suggests that these regions will continue to be high-risk areas, with irregular suicide bombings occasionally extending to other parts of the globe. But the present understanding of the high costs of suicide terrorism and the growing cooperation among intelligence services worldwide gives credence to the hope that in the future only desperate organizations of losers will try to use this tactic on a systematic basis.


For a valuable analysis of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), consult Manoj Joshi’s “On the Razor’s Edge: The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam” (Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, January 1996). On LTTE’s suicide modus operandi, see Rohan Gunaratna’s “The LTTE and Suicide Terrorism” (Frontline, February 5-8, 2000).


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