

Review Essay

What do we know about suicide bombing?

Review and analysis

ABSTRACT. In this article, the present status of our knowledge about the phenomenon of “suicide” bombing or “martyrdom” operations is identified. A review of many studies located at different levels of analysis is conducted, followed by an analysis and evaluation of the state of the research at each level. In addition, an exploration of the evolution in the characteristics of this tactic and the differences, if any, between subnational and transnational acts is undertaken. The conclusion identifies what we know and what may be appropriate for future research and public policy initiatives.

Key words: Terrorism, suicide, martyrdom, psychology, terrorist organizations

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Over the years there have been authors who have tackled a review and analysis of some aspects of “suicide” bombing or “martyrdom” operations. For example, there have been several efforts to review research undertaken on the mental health and motivations of the individuals themselves.^{1,2,3} In recent years, Martha Crenshaw took on the task of a critique of 13 books on the phenomenon of suicide attacks. Three key questions informed her discussion: “why sponsoring organizations would see suicide attacks as effective, why a community would support them, and why individuals would engage in them.”⁴ These questions identify three categories into which most studies fall: the individual bombers or “martyrs” themselves, the organizations that send them, and the larger community or society in the name of which these individuals and/or organizations act. Then there are those scholars, such as Mohammed Hafez, Rashmi Singh, and Assaf Moghadam, who have tried to develop a comprehensive framework that encompasses multiple levels and causes.^{5,6,7,8}

In this review and analysis, studies will be grouped into categories of the individual and the organization.

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The issue of the community and popular support is addressed in the context of a discussion of organizations. There follows an evaluation of the works of Hafez and Singh. A presentation of Moghadam’s work on global jihadism rounds out this final section before a general “summing up” of where we are today, which includes suggestions for possible areas of theoretical advancement.

In undertaking this review, a substantial number of English-language studies have been examined and analyzed. By no means can all such studies be covered in one article. Instead, this review represents a concerted effort to provide a good “sample” of works judged to be mainstream approaches, along with those considered provocative and/or challenging. The reader should come away with a good sense of the status of research in this field. Rather than attempt to note the contributions of each and every author, where there are points of agreement among many writers, they are identified, and where there are points of disagreement or uncertainty, those, too, are acknowledged.

Some scholars argue that organizations are more important, while others, even as they acknowledge the importance of organizations, believe that a focus on the individuals themselves is relevant. Obviously, the two are intertwined; they are in a symbiotic relationship, and, until recently, few attacks occurred without organizational support. It is this fact that leads some writers to identify organizations as the most crucial element. This close relationship between individuals and organizations has, of late, shifted with the appearance of

networks and what are termed “self-starter” cells guided by the ideology of al-Qaeda and/or the Islamic State (IS). This development is explored after the evaluation of material on individuals and organizations.

A final introductory point is on the differences, if any, between “suicide” attacks within the context of a national or ethnic conflict, as with the Palestinians or the now-defeated Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, and transnational “suicide” missions such as those conducted by al-Qaeda, its affiliates and supporters, and IS. This is an important issue, for the dynamics and circumstances that might lead a nationalist organization to initiate such attacks might be quite different from the forces that cause individuals to engage in cross-border attacks. What will be clear from this review is that many of the authors fail to address this possibility in their writings, although there are exceptions that are noted.

We begin with the bombers themselves. Palestinians refer to them as “sacred bombings,” “suicide bombers” is the phrase most widely used in non-Muslim circles, while “martyrs” is the term used extensively by the individuals and organizations engaged in such operations and a few researchers. Before proceeding, however, there are two definitional issues that need to be addressed and clarified.

Definitional questions

The terms of concern are “terrorism” and “suicide.” If one cannot arrive at a widely accepted definition of terrorism, then labeling an individual a terrorist is problematic. Rather than wade into the definitional morass, the quite straightforward description of John Horgan, that terrorism is “a conscious, deliberate strategic use of violence against a specific type of target to affect the political climate,” is adopted. Horgan correctly states “that it is most useful to see terrorism as something that one “does,” as opposed to thinking that the use of terrorism necessarily reflects something . . . that one “is.””⁹

There are two aspects with respect to suicide: one is the commonly understood meaning of suicide by sociologists and psychologists, and the other is the concept of martyrdom. As early as the classic nineteenth-century work on suicide by Émile Durkheim through to present-day scholars, the two are often discussed in concert. Durkheim dismisses any definitions that identify the act by the end sought—that is, one’s death. For Durkheim, “an act cannot be defined by the end sought by the actor, for an identical system of behavior may be adjustable

to many different ends without altering its nature.”¹⁰ As examples, Durkheim cites the soldier facing certain death and the martyr dying for his faith. He argues that “when resolution entails certain sacrifice of life, scientifically this is suicide.”¹¹ With this, Durkheim defines suicide as “all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result.” He identifies a continuum with acts of “courage and devotion” at one end, and, on the other, acts of “imprudence and clear neglect.”¹² Martyrs are treated as one subset of suicides. Durkheim rejects arguments that identify suicides as products of “psychopathic states.”

Where Durkheim is particularly valuable is in his development of categories of suicide. He presents three categories: egoistic, altruistic, and fatalistic. Egoistic suicide is driven by “excessive individualism,” with the person being detached from the social group.¹³ Fatalistic suicide, termed “anomic” by Durkheim, is associated with anger and disillusionment. It refers to crises that are “disturbances of the collective order” that lead to an increase in this type of suicide.¹⁴ The third type, altruistic, is further divided into three types: obligatory, acute, and optional. Obligatory suicide occurs out of a sense of duty. “If he fails in this obligation, he is dishonored and also punished, usually by religious sanctions.” “Altruism,” writes Durkheim, “[is] where the ego is not its own property . . . where the goal of conduct is exterior to itself . . . in one of the groups in which it participates.”¹⁵ For Durkheim, this is a case of obligatory altruistic suicide in which, under existing cultural norms and certain social conditions, it is the individual’s duty. There are cases in which “the individual kills himself purely for the joy of sacrifice.”¹⁶ It “springs from hope for it depends on the belief in beautiful perspectives beyond this life.”¹⁷ Labeled “acute altruistic suicide,” for Durkheim, this is done to achieve a desired afterlife.¹⁸ Optional is not defined as the result of a sense of duty but in the context of the approval of society. “A social prestige . . . attaches to suicide which receives encouragement from this fact.”¹⁹

Researchers such as Ami Pedahzur²⁰ and Pedahzur, Arie Perliger, and Leonard Weinberg²¹ apply Durkheim’s categories in their own studies of “suicide” terrorism. These analysts conclude that individuals adopting this tactic are a “combinative type of fatalistic-altruistic suicide.”²² Steve Stack, in his analysis of altruistic suicides, suggests the death by fire of Buddhist monks during the Vietnam War was a form of politically motivated “optional altruistic

suicide.”²³ Such politically motivated optional altruistic suicide is consistent with Durkheim’s view of “suicide occurring out of love for something one loves better than him/herself.”²⁴

What is missing from Durkheim’s analysis of altruistic or “martyr” suicides is the situation in which the “suicide” or “martyr” kills others as part of his or her decision to die. The addition of this element to the act leads to the label “suicide terrorism.” Yoram Schweitzer provides us with a definition.

A politically motivated violent attack perpetrated by a self-aware individual (or individuals) who actively and purposely causes his own death through blowing himself up along with his chosen target. The perpetrator’s ensured death is a precondition for the success of his mission.²⁵

It is important to stress that the label “suicide” commonly attached to these events is judged inappropriate and incorrect by individuals who engage in this act, for those who sanction and support the bombings, and for several scholars of Islamic law.²⁶ The action is labeled one of martyrdom; hence the individuals are identified as “martyrs” or “human bombs.” In the interest of balance, quotation marks will be placed around both terms where relevant.

Individuals

What is known of these individuals? Many studies focus on demographics, motivations, and the social environment within which individuals live. A further set of articles and books, often written by psychologists or psychiatrists, explore personality traits in order to identify possible emotional or mental aberrations. With respect to demographics, there seems to be fairly general agreement that, contrary to early beliefs, these individuals are not all from poor families; we have too many examples of individuals from middle-class or even wealthy families to support the earlier contention. Similarly, we see individuals with a range of educational experience. It is still the case, though, that most are young, unmarried males, with obvious exceptions, including the presence of women bombers, particularly in Chechnya and Sri Lanka.

Interesting work has been done on motivations. Have any conclusions been reached? One conclusion with which probably all researchers would agree is there is a mix of motives driving individuals. It may be easier to start by noting those motives generally dismissed or judged as problematic.

Economic motivations have received some attention, with a few researchers arguing in favor of a cost-benefit calculation—that the individual chooses to sacrifice himself or herself based upon a cost-benefit analysis. Such an argument is rooted in the fact that some Palestinian families received money after the deaths of their son. Thus, financial rewards are identified as the “benefit” that outweighs the “cost,” that is, the death of a family member (see, e.g., Aaron Blackwell²⁷). This argument has been successfully countered by researchers such as Mohammed Hafez, who notes that paradise in the Muslim tradition will not be granted for any material rewards.²⁸ Also, the costs to the family members are substantial: destruction of their home, interrogations and possible arrest, and restrictions on family members’ movements. The price for the family may be quite high. Further, Jeremy Ginges and Scott Atran found, in response to interviews on the subject of material incentives, that 90% of participants found compensation unacceptable. For these researchers, it was not material incentives but commitment to the community, or “parochial altruism,” that mattered.²⁹ Finally, there is no evidence that the families of the hundreds of bombers in Sri Lanka, Iraq, or Afghanistan were ever paid. For most authors, economic factors are judged largely irrelevant. Instead, the motives most frequently mentioned are a sense of despair, revenge, rage, nationalism, and religious belief.

Nasra Hassan, after more than 250 interviews with Palestinians, including future bombers, family members of successful bombers, and those who trained them, concludes,

None of them were uneducated, desperately poor, simple-minded, or depressed. Many were middle class and, unless they were fugitives, held paying jobs . . . They all seemed to be entirely normal members of their families. Most were bearded. All were deeply religious . . . I was told that in order to be accepted for a suicide mission the volunteers had to be convinced of the religious legitimacy of the acts they were contemplating, as sanctioned by the divinely revealed religion of Islam.³⁰

Hassan rejects the contention that “martyrs” have low self-esteem; rather, she agrees with Atran³¹ that it is rage, coupled with a sense of honor, that is important. She quotes a trainer: “If [personal revenge] alone motivates the candidate; his martyrdom will not be acceptable to Allah. It is a military response, not an individual’s bitterness that drives an operation.

Honor and dignity are very important in our culture. And when we are humiliated we respond with wrath.”³²

Similarly, Luca Ricolfi judges revenge alone to be an inadequate motivation. He points to an indifference to death or, perhaps one could add, an embracing of death.³³ Obviously, an individual’s willingness or even eagerness to die implies a loss of the fear of death, which itself requires an explanation. Several answers have been advanced, including a horrible life with no expectations for improvement, which implies a feeling of despair; nationalism and its attendant ties and identity with a larger community; and religious beliefs. The latter element has dominated many analyses of Palestinian bombers and, of course, al-Qaeda, along with IS. Religion has also found its way into studies on Chechen bombers, earlier identified as driven largely by revenge and nationalism. Before exploring these efforts, though, a brief discussion of the non-Muslim Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka is in order given their extensive use of this tactic and their role in the development and extensive use of “suicide” bombing.

Tamil Tigers

Described by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as innovators for their development of the suicide belt, the Tamil Tigers influenced other guerrilla and terrorist groups. “[T]heir methods were studied and copied,” reports Amy Waldman.^{34,35} What differentiates the Tamil Tigers from other groups is their adoption of “suicide” bombings as an integral element of military operations. This tactic was a “part of its overall strategy for fighting a war against the superior forces of the Sri Lankan government.”³⁶ Mia Bloom identifies an extreme ethnic nationalism and complete dedication to the Tigers’ now-dead leader Velupillai Prabhakaran as the dominant forces shaping individuals’ willingness to die.³⁷ But, as Stephen Hopgood argues, the Black Tigers, the groups associated with suicide missions, are, in fact, professional soldiers and participate in a range of military operations; therefore, they should not be thought of first and foremost as “suicide bombers.” There are instances, he reports, when individuals come back from so-called suicide missions to fight again. Hopgood argues that Black Tiger attacks are meant to win the war, not spread terror.³⁸ Research conducted by Michael Roberts provides partial support for Hopgood’s position when he reports that the Black Tigers were formed as a “special commando regiment” before the first-known suicide mission. “These precision bombs were not only used in ambush or battle.

They were deployed as weapons of assassination and bomb blast in the heart of enemy territory—especially Colombo.”³⁹ Members of the Tamil Tigers are first part of military units and then, if called upon, go on suicide missions. However, they have been sent on missions with the intent to terrorize the Sinhalese population and disrupt the economy.⁴⁰ Roberts does identify similar motivations as Bloom where individuals are “inspired by fervent beliefs in their cause in ways that instill steely determination and absolute commitment.”⁴¹

In the end, though, these are soldiers applying whatever means necessary to overcome a military disadvantage. This case recalls not other terrorist groups but Japanese kamikaze pilots ordered to self-destruct against a superior foe.

Religion

No researcher has identified religious beliefs as the sole motivating force, even among Palestinians or al-Qaeda, but the general consensus appears to be that it plays a crucial role, although there is variation in the importance assigned. Hence, Atran writes that “what matters . . . for most would-be martyrs and their sponsors whom I have interviewed is the martyr’s intention and commitment to God. It is inspired by love of one’s group and by rage at those who would humiliate it, but certainly not of blind rage.”⁴² Farhad Khosrokhavar explains that in Muslim societies, “martyrs” occupy a social space between heroes and saints. Distinguishing between defensive and offensive martyrdom, he notes that today offensive is preeminent. Offensive martyrdom “implies an active, and if need be violent struggle against those the believer regards as oppressors and heretics.”⁴³ One then is dying in a struggle against injustice, whether it is in a nationalist cause or in a desire to create a transnational *ummah*, as with al-Qaeda, or in the case of IS to protect and, if possible, expand the “caliphate.” He, too, points to the role of humiliation, honor, and pride in shaping the individual’s motivation.

One can see much of this with the 9/11 hijackers. Terry McDermott and colleagues, through extensive interviews with family, friends, fellow students, neighbors, coworkers, and teachers, arrived at a portrait of the principal figures.⁴⁴ The picture McDermott paints fits with the analysis of Khosrokhavar. We see a group of individuals, some quite religious, some less so, although with the passage of time, the latter individuals became more devout. Being in contact with the West, whether in the United States or Germany, seems to have

strengthened their Islamic identity. They would become committed to jihad.

A crucial element closely tied to religious motivation is the idea of sacrifice. Ivan Strenski, for example, argues for the need to pay greater attention to the “sacrificial” designations of these bombings. His major point is that these actions need to be understood as reflective of the relationship with others, both divine and human. These are social acts; they need to be thought of as sacrifices. Sacrifice in this instance means “making holy.” “They have been ‘made holy’ in the eyes of the community that ‘accepts’ them and their deed. They are elevated to lofty moral, and indeed religious levels, as sacrificial victims themselves or as kinds of holy saints.”⁴⁵ Hence, the individuals are sacrificial victims dying for a larger cause. A similar point is made by Hafez, who points to where the “symbolism of martyrdom becomes the vehicle through which individual bombers frame or give meaning to their different motivations for self sacrifice.”⁴⁶ These perspectives reinforce the judgment of Ginges and Atran that we are witnessing acts of “parochial altruism.” One is sacrificing one’s life for God and community.

To the extent, then, that individuals see themselves and are acknowledged by the larger community as sacrificing themselves in the name of God and community, their actions would meet the definition of “parochial altruism.” An interesting question is to what extent the 9/11 hijackers could be similarly identified. All the evidence points to the individuals’ motivation being religious and committed to the well-being of the *ummah*, the larger Muslim community.

Nationalism as motivator

Nasser Abufarha, in his ethnographic study of Palestinian resistance, reports on a culture that has changed as a result of a decades-old occupation with martyrdom “asserting Palestinian identity and rootedness [in the land].”⁴⁷ The work of Rashmi Singh on Hamas similarly points to cultural attitudes, particularly those that find the use of violence acceptable along with what is judged “altruistic” behavior on the part of the bombers. While Singh acknowledges the key organizational role of Hamas, she also notes that given the number of individuals and their willingness “to affiliate with any group willing to provide them with the infrastructure and logistics to conduct an operation,” this points to the altruistic nature of these individuals.⁴⁸ As with these other researchers, for Singh “the highly integrated individual’s sense of community responsibility effectively explains why so many Palestinians volunteered.”⁴⁹

Abufarha writes that it was Hamas that introduced the term *istishhadi*, which refers to acts of sacrifice. This new term, used by all Palestinian groups, whether religious or secular, was to link this act with the national struggle. To quote Abufarha, “The people see the *istishhadi* as . . . the highest degrees of nationalism and religion.”⁵⁰ Thus, in the case of Palestinians, political Islam became “an alternative form of nationalism.”⁵¹

Scholars of Palestinian society identify both religion and nationalism as an integral element of the narrative of all groups.⁵² Barbara Victor reinforces this judgment. We see this with Fatah, headed by Yasser Arafat, and its adoption of martyrdom operations. Victor concludes that “dying for the nation of Palestine and dying to ‘sit at Allah’s table’ in Paradise, have become, for some, cherished goals.”⁵³ In the case of Palestine, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to separate religion from nationalism as the drivers in an individual’s decision to become a “martyr.”

With the Tamil Tigers, nationalism, along with a deep devotion to Prabhakaran, as noted earlier, appear to be the key motivators. Carefully selected and trained, the Black Tigers are willing to martyr themselves for leader and community. To the extent that these bombings are the outcome of commitment to nation, then they, too, should be judged to be examples of “parochial altruism.”

The number of “suicide” bombings in Iraq far outnumbered such operations elsewhere, even as such attacks continue. A 2011 report in the *Lancet* identified at least 1,003 bombings from March 20, 2003, to December 31, 2010.⁵⁴ Although no updated studies could be found, many more attacks have occurred. The question is the extent to which these attacks can be said to be driven by nationalism. “Nationalist groups,” writes Riaz Hassan, “normally do not attack civilians and rarely use suicide bombing as a weapon.”⁵⁵ Instead, given their aims—to drive out occupying forces and reinstituted Sunni dominance in the political system—their targets have been “coalition and Iraqi forces, Shia and Kurdish militias.”⁵⁶ Who, then, are the “human bombs?” Several scholars identify foreign jihadists as the perpetrators, with Shia Iraqis frequent targets, along with those Iraqis deemed “collaborators.”⁵⁷ However, there is an important caveat, for the vast majority of bombers have not been identified. Therefore, it remains unclear to what extent nationalism can definitively be ruled out. Although, the existence of jihadist networks that function as conduits for individuals committed to martyrdom in

Iraq does provide indirect support for the claim that foreigners make up the majority of bombers.⁵⁸ In the final analysis, it is difficult to categorize “martyrs” in Iraq as nationalists. To the extent that they are driven by religion, though, they, too, can be judged “parochial altruists” as they die for God and the *ummah*.

Psychological/psychiatric factors as motivators

There are two bodies of work with respect to psychological or psychiatric causes for action. One set of studies focuses on the act of terrorism in general, while the second explores “suicide” bombers in particular in an effort to identify a “suicide” bomber personality. We begin with the first set of studies, which has a longer history, and then move on to consider efforts to find a particular “suicide” personality type.

There are a large number of articles and books that address a possible psychological and/or psychiatric basis for acts of terrorism. Given the limitations of space, only a brief presentation of several of the claims advanced will be discussed, along with criticism of such judgments.

Arguments from psychiatry and psychology started in the 1970s and 1980s, with a number of newer studies in the wake of the attacks of 9/11. The general conclusion of those early studies was “that terrorism is driven by mental disorders.”⁵⁹ One common early claim was that terrorists suffer from the personality disorder psychopathy or sociopathy, referred to today as antisocial personality.⁶⁰ Horgan writes that an antisocial personality is one who displays “an unwillingness to conform to social or communal rules . . . with violence often an outlet for aggressive tendencies.” Psychopaths show “a lack of remorse or guilt for his/her activities and a selfish egotistical world view that precludes any genuine welfare for others.”⁶¹ The attraction of this claim is understandable in light of terrorist violence.

Another condition cited by several professionals, including Jerrold Post, is that terrorists are narcissistic and so have no regard for others.⁶² Some see terrorists as paranoid, defined as follows:

The essential feature is a personality disorder in which there is a pervasive and unwarranted suspiciousness and distrust of people, hypersensitivity, and restricted affectivity . . . Individuals with this disorder are . . . viewed as hostile, stubborn and defensive. They tend to be rigid and unwilling to compromise.⁶³

Post writes, “The principal argument . . . is that political terrorists are driven to commit acts of violence as a consequence of psychological forces, and that their special psycho-logic is constructed to rationalize acts they are psychologically compelled to commit.”⁶⁴ The psychological concept initially appeared in a 1990 article that identified two types of terrorist groups: anarchic-ideologues and nationalist-separatists. Variables key to an individual’s decision to join a terrorist group are parents who are or are not loyal to a regime and the individual who is or is not loyal to his or her parents. When parents are disloyal to the regime while their child is loyal to them, they are labeled nationalist-separatist terrorists. Anarchic-ideologues terrorists are disloyal to their parents, who are themselves loyal to a regime. For Post, two factors are crucial: individuals “who have fragmented psychosocial identities” and group dynamics and ideology.⁶⁵

In a later book, *The Mind of the Terrorist*, Post returns to the leaders of terrorist groups as not just purveyors of a cause but also as creators of “the dominant terrorist psychology.”⁶⁶ For Post, “creators” are leaders who draw “together alienated, frustrated individuals into a coherent organization.”⁶⁷ He does not explain what he means by “the dominant terrorist psychology” except to emphasize that it is terrorist leaders who frame the causes that, in turn, “offer windows into the psychology and motivations of the followers who are attracted to their hate-mongering messages.”⁶⁸ Post does underscore that, for him, a key element to understand terrorists’ identity is that “from childhood on ‘hatred is bred in the bone.’”⁶⁹ Abdullah Ocalan, the now-imprisoned head of the Kurdistan Workers Party, is labeled “an intensely narcissistic personality.”⁷⁰ The Tamil Tiger leader Prabhakaran, now dead, is described as showing elements of “emerging psychopathic personality” or “a strong sense of paranoia.”⁷¹

However, despite the application of certain psychological disorders or problematic tendencies to individual terrorist leaders, Post concludes, “It is not individual psychopathology, but group, organizational and social psychology with a particular emphasis on ‘collective identity,’ that provides the most powerful lens through which to understand terrorist psychology and behavior.”⁷² Hence, even though leaders are judged psychologically problematic, other, more social elements are identified as crucial to understand terrorist actions. Collective identity is assigned a key role when the individual is subsumed into the group, which is itself a product of a specific social context. A question raised by

these positions is whether a judgment of narcissism may be integrated into a model grounded in social elements, as well as the relative weight assigned to each as a causal element.

Psychodynamic accounts grow out of the work of Sigmund Freud. It is the presence of latent, unresolved desires that are seen as the source of later difficulties. For example, researchers focused on then—West German terrorists identify a sense of “unconscious patricidal impulses” as the driver to act. Horgan notes that this approach attempts to apply a particular psycho-logic [to] terrorists’ behavior.”⁷³

The final approach, before moving on to criticisms, is on efforts to demonstrate that “the terrorist is at the very least . . . psychologically ‘different’ from the non-terrorist.”⁷⁴ The focus is on biological and sociological factors, along with psychological elements. A widely cited study used to support this contention is a multi-researcher study of more than 200 German terrorists. This study uses terms such as “unstable,” “uninhibited,” and “aggressive” to describe individual terrorists. However, “different findings by members of the same team” raise serious questions about the study’s reliability.⁷⁵ These authors conclude that individual terrorists have a certain type of personality or a tendency toward particular personality types.

Criticism of psychological/psychiatric theories

Andrew Silke, in his critique of these studies, points to what he terms “Cheshire-cat thinking [as] a form of attribution error where observers develop expectations about an individual’s personality based on what the individual does or, as in Alice’s case, where the individual is located.”⁷⁶ Horgan similarly points to an attribution error, although of a different nature. For Horgan, the error is “to explain other people’s behavior with reference to dispositional features . . . while we might attribute situational features to our own.”⁷⁷ Both reviewers imply that the very fact that these individuals have been labeled terrorists shapes the attitudes some researchers bring to their work. However, this is an empirical question that would require a separate investigation. What of the several theoretical claims made?

With the psychopathic claim, there is little direct evidence. Where case histories are provided, the numbers are very small—too small to draw any acceptable conclusions.⁷⁸ Horgan notes that the “pathological egocentricity commonly found in psychopathic individuals seems to conflict with some of the required characteristics sought after by terrorist leaders of their

members—high motivation, discipline and an ability to remain reliable and task-focused in the face of stress, possible capture and imprisonment.”⁷⁹

What is the strength of the evidence that terrorists suffer from narcissistic tendencies? Richard Pearlstein claims that the vast percentage of terrorists displays this disorder, while Post sees its presence, or tendencies, in terrorist leaders. The difficulty is lack of evidence. Pearlstein’s claim rests on nine case studies.⁸⁰ Post’s conclusions come as a result of a reading of public statements made by Ocalan; whether this is adequate as evidence remains open to question. A similar set of problems arises with the charge that terrorists are paranoids. There is no evidence to support such a conclusion, for there have been no direct clinical diagnoses. In his 2007 monograph, Post labels Prabhakaran someone with “a strong sense of paranoia.” This is based on statements and secondary sources. With respect to the psychodynamic explanation, the difficulty is such claims are not falsifiable.

To summarize, there is little hard evidence to support the many claims made that individuals who join terrorist groups and engage in terrorist acts suffer from some type of personality disorder. On the other side of the issue are those who argue in favor of the “normality” of terrorist behavior, a position with which Post agrees. Silke notes that “those who say terrorists are not abnormal tend to be those who have direct contact and experience with actual terrorists.”⁸¹ Horgan, in support of this position, cites a body of evidence where no distinctive personality traits were found. Two psychiatrists, H. A. Lyons and H. J. Harbinson, conducted a study in which they compared a group of “political murderers” with a group of “non-political murderers” in Northern Ireland and found the former more stable than the latter. Lyons argues,

These are not people who are psychiatrically abnormal . . . The political killers tended to be normal in intelligence and mental stability, didn’t have significant psychiatric problems or mental illness and didn’t abuse alcohol. They didn’t show remorse because they rationalized it very successfully, believing that they were fighting for a cause. The political, generally speaking, did not want to be seen by a psychiatrist; they feel there is nothing wrong with them, but they did co-operate.⁸²

Suicide/martyr personality?

What of individuals who undertake “suicide” missions: are they different from other terrorists? A few researchers have argued in favor or claim to have discovered a personality disorder among these individuals. But the majority focus their efforts on understanding the social environment, the dynamics and values, the groups that adopt this tactic, and the specific motivations, both secular and sacred, as discussed earlier, that may lead individuals to sacrifice their life for a cause and/or charismatic leader.

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, articles appeared that assigned responsibility to the childhoods of these individuals. Joan Lachkar, writing in 2002, notes that one must examine a suicide bomber “within the matrix of the borderline personality.” “Osama bin Laden,” she writes, “is a pathological borderline.” No evidence is provided that specific individual bombers fit this diagnosis. Instead, Lachkar proceeds to criticize Islam and “Islamic” child-rearing, which, she claims, “attempts to repudiate all aspects of dependency and perceived all personal desires, needs, and wishes as tantamount to weakness and failure,” hence the link to borderline personalities.⁸³ All Muslims, whether in the United States, Europe, Saudi Arabia, or Indonesia, are found equally at fault. No evidence is presented. Lloyd deMause makes similar claims when he writes that “[f]amilies that produce the most terrorists are the most violently misogynist.”⁸⁴ Again, no evidence is provided.

An example of the often speculative nature of psychological accounts is a recent article in which the author advances the judgment that “suicide” bombers are, in fact, suicidal. Adam Lankford, rather than apply the material provided by interviews with family and friends, along with statements from the “suicide” bombers themselves, rejects these sources as untrustworthy.^{85,86} This would seem to severely limit any possibility of an accurate “diagnosis” given the thousands of miles and lack of contact with these now-dead individuals. Yet the author, after detailing possible symptoms associated with suicidal tendencies, proceeds to identify certain individual bombers as suicides. This judgment is based upon those same videos and statements the author rejected as untrustworthy. The problematic nature of such a claim is clear.

Ariel Merari’s study is quite different. A longtime researcher on Palestinian terrorism, in an earlier study, Merari argued against the claim that these individuals

suffered from any sociopathic disorder. He also reported that “there was no common personality type for all or most of the suicides.” Merari explicitly rejected “personality disorders and suicidality” as “the key to understanding terrorist suicide.”⁸⁷ However, in his most recent monograph, *Driven to Death*, along with two articles published that reference the same study, Merari and coauthors conclude there is evidence, among some of those would-be “suicide” bombers, of a distinctive personality type.

Extensive psychological testing and interviews of Palestinians imprisoned in Israeli jails are the core of the study. The study raises a series of questions, many addressed by Merari and his colleagues. How representative is the sample of either “suicide” bombers or Palestinian males? What conclusions can be reached with such very small numbers? What impact, if any, does imprisonment have on the demeanor, attitudes, and statements of the individuals? What impact do the different roles of the prisoners have on how they tested? For Merari and his colleagues, this research is a “direct *psychological* study of martyrdom terrorists and of organizers of martyrdom attacks.”⁸⁸ Fifteen would-be bombers, caught before they could act, a control sample of 12 Palestinians who engaged in violent acts, and 14 organizers make up the individuals interviewed. The number totals 41.

The numbers are quite small in light of the close to 700 such attacks, successful and unsuccessful, as of the end of 2007.⁸⁹ Factors that might raise doubts about any conclusions drawn are acknowledged by Merari: the fact these individuals are in jail, that their responses could be designed to give their interviewers what they believe they want. Despite these concerns, the research went forward given that the “captured would-be suicides are . . . the best and only accessible representatives of suicide bombers.”⁹⁰ Of the 15 caught, however, only four were captured because their explosive devices malfunctioned. Any conclusions about the others are questionable. Jon Elster writes; “Interviews with would-be suicide attackers who failed or were failed are an intrinsically unreliable source . . . [W]e do not know . . . if they would actually have gone through with the act had they not been stopped.”⁹¹ Merari is aware of this concern, as he is aware of the fact that these individuals are not a random or representative sample of Palestinians at large; neither are they a random sample of members and/or affiliates of the various resistance groups.

The findings are that a majority of the 15, nine, or 60% of the would-be bombers are diagnosed as

dependent-avoidant personality types. Of the 12 control group, 16.7% or two are similarly diagnosed; 66.7% or eight of the control group are judged impulsive and emotionally unstable, while four of the would-be suicides are identified with the same psychological traits. Six of the would-be bombers are also judged to have “suicidal tendencies,” along with eight found to have depressive tendencies; with only one in the control group judged depressive. By depressive tendencies the researchers mean displays of “sadness, sometimes tearfulness, lack of vitality, slowness, and distracted attention.”⁹² Merari reports on a degree of difference between the four individuals with malfunctioning devices that all are “assessed as a dependent/avoidant personality, whereas only 54.5% [six] of the uncertain suicides belonged to this category.”⁹³

Personality types are different from personality disorders. “Personality traits are diagnosed as a Personality Disorder only when they are inflexible, maladaptive, and persisting and cause significant functional impairment or subjective distress.”⁹⁴ None of those so identified are found to have disorders; instead, they are termed “dependent and avoidant styles.”⁹⁵ How widespread such a personality type may be is unknown. When one individual is diagnosed to be both avoidant and dependent, “the clinical picture is of a person completely engulfed by the will of another person or group.” Such a person, write Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, would be unlikely to undertake any risky behavior. Fear of humiliation seems to undercut any possibility of volunteers, yet volunteers there have been.⁹⁶ Passivity and fear, parts of such personality types, would prevent individuals taking action on their own. If this diagnosis is correct, then how can we explain those individuals who actively seek “martyrdom” as “human bombs?”

Merari and colleagues acknowledge that different settings and cultures may produce differences in personality types beyond what they found among Palestinians.⁹⁷ The Palestinian “suicide” bombers are the product of the martyrdom culture itself. Abufarha takes this position in his ethnographic study of Palestinian resistance. He writes,

The act of martyrdom has become widespread . . . because it provides cultural meanings to Palestinians . . . the killing of the martyr who performs the martyrdom operation along with the killing of his or her Israeli victims . . . does not represent a psychological pathology but rather a cultural

expression of how violence is conceived and culturally understood in this specific cultural context in the historic moment of its performance.⁹⁸

Ibanez echoes Abufarha: “the diffusion of a culture that frames the death of human bombers as an altruistic and venerable action for the sake of their own community . . . is probably the most important accelerant of radicalization, mobilization, and polarization that stimulates suicide terrorism.”⁹⁹ A cultural explanation does not eliminate the possible existence of a particular personality type, but it does present another dynamic, powerful force that shapes the lives of Palestinians, particularly the young. Cultural drivers should be a major part of any explanation of the decision to adopt this tactic.

A final point on the Merari research is the impact of imprisonment on character and personality tendencies and traits. He and his colleagues dismiss any impact of imprisonment. Specifically, the differences found between would-be bombers and the control groups are cited as evidence of the null effect of imprisonment. This is certainly a reasonable interpretation, but it is also reasonable to assume that different individuals may respond to incarceration differently. Any evidence of suicidal or depressive tendencies may well be a product of those individuals’ reactions to prison. For the would-be failed bombers in particular, the very fact of their failure may have a powerful impact on their emotional state. For Merari, the fact that the would-be bombers seemed to accept failure eliminated a possible incarceration effect.¹⁰⁰ The famous Stanford Prison experiment conducted in the early 1970s under the leadership of Philip Zimbardo is worth consideration here, for it directly addresses the issue of the impact of imprisonment on individuals’ psychological states, an important consideration in this analysis.

The numbers involved in the Zimbardo experiment were small: 21 out of 75 respondents to a newspaper ad seeking male participants. However, pre-testing was conducted to ensure only the “most stable (physically and mentally), most mature and least involved in anti-social behavior were selected.” The selection of “guards” and “prisoners” was done on a random basis. The “guards” were given minimal guidelines, chiefly to maintain order and commit no physical abuse.¹⁰¹ Generally the “prisoners” adopted a passive response, “while guards assumed a very active initiating rule . . . Within two days, five “prisoners” were released due to “extreme emotional depression.”¹⁰² Despite the

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pre-tests, in which all were labeled “normal-average,” there were marked differences; some of the “prisoners” coped better, while some of the “guards” were more hostile and cruel. An important finding on the part of the experimenters was that “it is apparent that initial personality-attitude dispositions account for an extremely small part of the variation in reactions.”¹⁰³ What is striking is the apparent shift, in under a week, where “normal-average” became “pathological and anti-social.”¹⁰⁴ This underscores the power of social forces, of situational variables.

How does this experiment relate to the findings of the Merari study? One interesting twist is the power of the role itself to shape individuals’ behavior in a specific setting. What we cannot know, as no pre-test is possible on Palestinian prisoners, is the impact of the prison experience itself on how individuals see themselves and their role in the resistance. The respective roles, would-be bomber and violent Palestinian fighter (the control group), were obviously known. What we cannot know is their psychological impact beyond, as noted earlier, a possible depressive reaction for failure on the part of the bombers. Merari and colleagues describe the statements made by prisoners as “frank.”¹⁰⁵ There is a need for caution though in light of the reality of these individuals’ position. Horgan notes that “the importance of the development and possible maintenance of some form of trust is paramount in obtaining any form of reliable and valid insights during interviews.”¹⁰⁶ Whether trust was attained is unknown.

This is clearly a well-designed, thoughtful effort to get at what personal traits, if any, distinguish “suicide” bombers from others. Merari is quick to note that personality type alone is not sufficient to create bombers. However, given the inherent limitations of the research, labeling Palestinian “suicide” bombers a particular type may be premature.

Anne Speckhard, a clinical psychologist, has conducted hundreds of interviews in multiple countries, including a substantial number in the West Bank and Gaza Strip along with a few interviews in an Israeli prison. This extraordinary range of interviews provides unique insights beyond those of most other researchers. She spent many hours in thoughtful conversation in a manner that appeared to lead interviewees to trust her. Speckhard’s goal was not to identify a specific type of personality, but to better understand motivations.

[W]e found in Palestine, that the bombers know their “martyrdom” actions make no real difference in the struggle... But they are still willing

to “martyr” themselves to escape their pain, to hearten their fellow citizens and to express the community-wide outrage and emotional pain over the losses they have felt, and to *make others feel their pain*.¹⁰⁷

Beyond Palestinians, Speckhard concludes “that context is all-important,” and that many terrorists were “disturbed... by psychological trauma [i.e., PTSD] and bereavement.”¹⁰⁸ Her findings provide a different perspective on the psychological dynamics associated with “suicide” bombers.

Although not strictly focused on “suicide” bombers, the studies that make up *The Fundamentalist Mindset* do address psychological elements in an effort to explain the “relationship of fundamentalism to violence.”¹⁰⁹ Charles Strozier and Katherine Boyd identify the characteristics of the fundamentalist mind-set: “dualistic thinking; paranoid rage in a group context; an apocalyptic orientation... a relationship to charismatic leadership; and a totalized conversion experience.”¹¹⁰

The many chapters range in subject from Christian and American contexts to the Nazi ideology to chapters on global jihadism and Hindu nationalism. The authors focus on one or more of the identified characteristics, although it is important to note that religion is not emphasized in some of the chapters—somewhat surprising given the topic under investigation. As for the definition of fundamentalism itself, Strozier and Boyd “argue... for the benefits of ambiguity, which makes for a larger conceptual umbrella. Fundamentalism is clearest in context.”¹¹¹ “Ambiguity” in this instance means an opening up to multiple interpretations of what is entailed by “fundamentalism,” although the adoption of the “fundamentalist mindset,” as noted earlier, does seem to provide guidance to what should be investigated. The rationale for the lack of a definition for the authors is fundamentalism’s “protean and elusive nature,” as well as being “too new historically for there to be a clear and agreed-upon definition.”¹¹² Strozier and Boyd are correct that there exists no consensus definition, although the term “fundamentalism” has a long history from the early twentieth century, when a series of pamphlets by Christians urged a return to the “fundamentals” in the face of biblical exegesis and evolution. Writing in 1920, Curtin Lee Laws describes a “fundamentalist [as] a person willing to ‘do battle royal’ for the fundamentals of the faith.”¹¹³ Today, beyond a call to defend core doctrines of Protestant Christianity, reference to a “fundamentalist” has come to

mean textual literalism, inerrancy, and orthodox beliefs. Whether appropriate or not, the term has been extended to other religious traditions.

The authors of *Strong Religion: the Rise of Fundamentalism around the World* provide their own definition as they draw upon the five-volume Fundamentalism Project. “Fundamentalism, . . . refers to a discernible pattern of religious militancy by which self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors.”¹¹⁴ Hence, the focus is on behaviors, not psychological mindsets.

With respect to Strozier and Boyd’s position on the issue of a definition, there are costs in any effort to explore a phenomenon with open-ended meanings. Conceptual stretching, which is what is happening here, opens up the users to the charge of “meaningless” as the stretching increases the danger that virtually any and all may be so labeled.¹¹⁵

Many of the emotional states identified by other researchers noted earlier are also identified by several of the authors. For example, Khosrokhavar, in his discussion of global jihadists, refers to feelings of revenge, humiliation, and victimizations, along with a judgment of narcissism.¹¹⁶ Narcissistic rage is identified as a product of traumatic humiliation, itself tied to paranoia of the individual with extension to the group relevant. There are two difficulties with such a conclusion. First, trauma and humiliation are not uncommon experiences. Many more individuals experience such feelings than engage in acts of violence. Second, as with earlier authors’ claims of paranoia, there is no evidence. Finally, there is the claim that the fundamentalist mindset exists universally “as a potential in the self,” while at the same time it is identified as a sign of a pathology.¹¹⁷

We are left with discussions of many of the psychological and psychoanalytic states and circumstances highlighted by other researchers. The notion embedded in the concept of a fundamentalist mindset may offer a potential window into the mental state of individuals that turn to violence, but empirical research requires a concept or concepts able to provide nonspeculative evidence.

A final issue worth a brief discussion is that of so-called lone wolf terrorists. Although some have died in the commission of their attack, lone wolf terrorists are not “suicides” or “martyrs”; they are not defined as “suicide” bombers. The fact that individuals identified as lone wolf” terrorists conducted multiple attacks

over several years, such as Eric Randolph and Theodore Kaczynski, underscores this point. But, unlike the “suicide” bombers judged largely “normal, by scholars such as Horgan and McCauley, there are a percentage of such attackers found to suffer from some form of mental stress. The fact that lone wolf attackers survive to be arrested, tried, and convicted permits psychological examinations which, in turn, may lead to a diagnosis of a mental disorder. It is important to note, however, that the majority are not judged mentally ill in most studies.¹¹⁸

The judgment of “normality” with respect to “suicide” bombers is not surprising given that individuals are selected and/or trained by organization leaders who would be hesitant to “employ” a mentally unstable person. The situation is markedly different with lone wolf attackers who are not vetted by anyone. Paul Gill cites multiple studies in which estimates of mental health problems range from a low of 22% to a high of 61% who “had previous contact with mental health services.” Gill’s own findings identify 41% with “mental health problems.”¹¹⁹

This raises an interesting question: why the apparent difference in mental state between the two groups of individuals engaged in acts of violence? An investigation into a possible answer cannot, though, be addressed here. What is clear is that research on lone wolf terrorists faces similar challenges faced by other terrorism research. There is no agreed definition of lone wolf terrorists, which means data sets collected to advance research on the topic differ. This, in turn, makes comparison or building on earlier research difficult. For example, Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, is excluded from some lone wolf data sets and included in others.^{120,121} As with other researchers though lone wolf scholars agree there exists no reliable profile of a lone wolf terrorist.

In the end, a key question is, if we knew a great deal about the psychological makeup of “suicide” or “martyrdom” bombers would that be of value to either reduce or eliminate the pool of individuals? An interim answer is probably not. Even if replicated, no team of researchers would be capable of typecasting an entire population, or even just young males. Even if Merari’s study could be replicated on a larger scale in the West Bank, and a definitive personality profile identified, a daunting task indeed, there is also the question of whether a particular personality type predicts future behavior in a wide range of circumstances. Although an understandably fascinating topic in itself, and one

worth exploring for greater insights into the human character, it may be more fruitful in terms of policy to affect change in the social environment and in the organizations that recruit and support such operations.

Organizations

Research conducted to understand why an organization's leaders choose suicide bombing as a tactic tend to focus, not surprisingly, on specific groups; a few scholars, such as Hafez, Singh, and Moghadam, whose work will be addressed later, have advanced frameworks meant to apply to all organizations. Then there is al-Qaeda, a particular challenge given its changing nature, and IS. Both will be discussed separately, after a presentation of some of the major works on organizations.

Books that center more on organizational dynamics are Mia Bloom's *Dying to Kill* and Robert Pape's *Dying to Win*. Pape, along with coauthor James Feldman, have followed up the first study with *Cutting the Fuse*.^{122,123,124} As the Bloom and initial Pape volume have received a lot of attention, and are likely to continue to do so, it is worth setting out each author's main points. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the Pape and Feldman study.

Robert Pape's argument is that "suicide terrorism is a strategy for national liberation from foreign military occupation by a democratic state." The leaders of these organizations, writes Pape, choose this tactic as a result of a calculation that it will further their cause; a rational choice. For Pape, "foreign occupation involves the exertion of political and military control over territory by an outside group." It is a situation "in which a foreign power has the ability to control the local government independent of the wishes of the local community."¹²⁵ He clearly means this theory to cover all known organizations that have utilized "suicide" bombings, including al-Qaeda.

Mia Bloom writes that "although the individual bombers might be inspired by several... motives, the organizations that send the bombers do so because such attacks are an effective means to intimidate and demoralize the enemy." "[O]rganizations are rationally motivated and use violence to achieve their goals. The operations are... aimed at ending a foreign occupation, increasing the prestige of the organization that uses them, and leading to regional autonomy and/or independence."¹²⁶ What is of importance to Bloom is the attitude and relative support of the community.

If such support is not present, then it is unlikely we will see organizations use such a tactic. With respect to "increasing the prestige of the organization," she argues that when there are several organizations operating, they each seek to increase their support at the expense of the others so we see a process of outbidding with each trying to outbid the other for the loyalty of the relevant community. Bloom, unlike Pape, does not focus on al-Qaeda; instead she looks at nationalist, insurgency movements such as the Tamils, Palestinians, and Kurds.

Both authors' works have received criticisms. Pape's claim that "suicide bombing" is triggered by foreign occupations is problematic given the numbers of such attacks and their locations. Pakistan has suffered a number of suicide attacks with key civilian leaders and security forces as the primary targets, yet Pakistan is not occupied. There have also been bombings in Indonesia, Egypt, and Uzbekistan, none of which is occupied. Time may have undercut Pape's thesis as we now see, to quote Atran "a thoroughly modern, global diaspora inspired by religion and claiming the role of vanguard for a... transnational political awakening."¹²⁷ For Atran, as for others, such a diaspora can be found in the several attacks undertaken in Europe. With respect to the meaning of "occupation," Assaf Moghadam writes,

[A]l-Qaida's understanding of occupation is much broader. It includes a long history of injustices manifested today in the military, religious, political, economic, and cultural humiliation of the larger Muslim world by the "Crusader-Zionist alliance." It is this ideologically inspired definition of occupation that matters most for al-Qaida but that is absent from Pape's analysis.¹²⁸

A further difficulty with Pape's argument is his claim that the tactic of "suicide" bombing was chosen because of its relative success in gaining the removal of foreign occupiers. Pape writes that 54% of such campaigns achieved success.¹²⁹ However, Moghadam, after a careful analysis of the cases, refutes Pape. Only four out of 17 cases, 24%, can be judged a success with some change in government policy according to Moghadam.¹³⁰ In fact, the tactic did not result in the withdrawal of foreign forces with the sole exception of the United States withdrawal from Lebanon in 1984.

Bloom's outbidding thesis may hold in the Palestinian case with the 2000 intifada, but there have clearly been periods of cooperation among different Palestinian groups. With the case of the Tamil Tigers, their suicide mission campaign began in 1990, several years after all

rival groups had been destroyed. It is, of course, hard to fit al-Qaeda into this frame. It would be difficult to argue that outbidding played a role in the adoption of this tactic by al-Qaeda. It was only with the advent of IS that a challenge to al-Qaeda emerged.

In the Pape and Feldman 2011 study, the argument made in the earlier work is largely replicated. The intent of the authors is to counter the claim that religion plays a role in the advent of “suicide” bombings; that instead, as noted earlier, the cause is foreign occupation. The problem remains, however, for if it is the case that occupation was the trigger, then they would need to explain why earlier occupations such as those in Vietnam and Algeria saw no “suicide” attacks. Similarly, even as foreign occupations occurred throughout the colonial period by the British, Dutch, and French, there were no such attacks. Finally, without doubt Iraq, post invasion, has experienced hundreds of “suicide” attacks. One could claim the occupation by the West, led by the United States, is responsible for Iraqi bombers choice to use this, among other tactics, to drive out foreign invaders. However, there are two difficulties here. First, these attacks targeted Shia and Iraqi security forces as well. Second, it appears, as discussed earlier, that the majority of bombers were not Iraqis. This undercuts the argument that it is nationalist sentiment that leads to such attacks.

Other studies point to a strategic rationale. Khaled Hroub, Bruce Hoffman and Gordon McCormick, Asaf Moghadam, and Anders Strinberg and Mats Warn all note a strategic rationale behind the use of suicide bombings for organizations.^{131,132,133,134} Most of these studies focus on Palestinian groups. For example, Dipak Gupta and Kusum Mundra argue that “an organization takes decisions to maximize its ideological as well as political and organizational goals.”¹³⁵ However, Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi’s report on suicide attacks in Pakistan identifies their occurrence as the consequence of then-president Pervez Musharraf’s alliance with the United States in the “war on terror.” This led Musharraf, under American pressure, to undertake military operations in the tribal areas. Thus, for Zaidi, these attacks are “an indication of the dynamic of politics at work.”¹³⁶ Anger against a government’s political position led to the use of such attacks. The end of Musharraf’s rule has not meant the end of “suicide” bombings. It may be appropriate to term these attacks the result of revenge or retaliation against government forces deemed to have shifted sides to the designated enemy, the United States.

The first Chechen suicide bombing occurred in 2000 after the official end of the Second Chechen War against Russia. Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova explain the adoption of this tactic as the result of the introduction of Wahhabism into the society. Groups in Chechnya refer to themselves as “true believers.”¹³⁷ Thus, religion as ideology is the principal driver. Those who emphasize a strategic rationale do not ignore the role of religion, but place strategic considerations first.

A key difference between the Palestinian and Chechnya cases is public support. Palestinians have at various times been very supportive of “martyrdom” operations, while Speckhard and Akhmedova report little support among individuals they interviewed, although these respondents would not condemn the individuals that undertook such missions.¹³⁸ Popular support has been judged critical in such ethnic/nationalist struggles in order for organizations to adopt such means. However, in this case, what seems more important is a lack of condemnation by the public.

There has been a campaign of “suicide” bombing in Somalia, with the first incidence in 2006. Although there are several Islamist groups only one, Harakat al-Shabaab, has adopted this tactic. Stig Jarle Hansen explores several possible explanations for the appearance of “suicide” bombing in this one group. He notes that the reason other groups have failed to use this form of attack is due to the nature of the Somali clan society, and the absence, in the past, of any guiding ideology. With al-Shabaab, however, the core group was veterans from Afghanistan and they had strong ideological beliefs, including “pan-Islamist and jihadist rhetoric.”¹³⁹ This explains their close identification with al-Qaeda. Adoption of such an ideology provides the necessary justification for “suicide” bombing, and so separates al-Shabaab from other Islamist groups in Somalia.

The power of this particular ideology is clear in this case, as it seems to be in the case of Chechnya where a similar set of beliefs led to the adoption of “suicide” attacks. A powerful ideology, linked with an ethno-nationalist cause, provides organizations’ leaders, including several Palestinian ones such as Hamas, with a justification to adopt “martyrdom” operations. The Tamil Tigers were an ethno-nationalist group which did engage in suicide missions, often in conjunction with standard military operations. Yet there was also a clear emphasis on martyrdom within the organization. Although not Muslim, and not guided by any of the same beliefs as Islamist groups, there are still elements of sacrifice and “commemorative rites.” Michael Roberts

reports on an observer who notes that “the Great Heroes Day observances provide them with the feeling that by sacrificing their lives they would grasp eternity and ensure immortality.”¹⁴⁰ Just as Palestinians speak and write of their actions sanctifying the blood-soaked soil, so, too, do Tamils. Roberts writes, “The seed metaphor and the many embodied practices of grieving kin, as well as their iconography, convey the idea that fallen fighters are an embodiment of *sakti*—divine essence of cosmic energy.”¹⁴¹ Are there any leaders of organizations who decide to adopt suicide missions wholly on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis, devoid of any justifying ideology? The tentative answer is no. Strategic considerations certainly do matter, but it is difficult to imagine any group’s leaders able to undertake such a tactic without a powerful justification such as that provided by an ideology, religious or otherwise.

Before moving on to consider the works that develop a comprehensive framework of analysis, a discussion on the emergence of networks and cells with little or no formal organizational elements is in order, along with so-called self-starters. This is also an appropriate point at which to explore where transnational movements such as al-Qaeda fit and the extent to which, if at all, they differ from nationalist-based groups. This leaves the question of IS which is, in some sense, a case apart for it is neither nationalist, nor wholly transnational. IS deserves a separate discussion, which follows that on al-Qaeda.

An alternative to organizations: Social ties?

The last few years have seen a number of researchers focus on the power of small groups captured through the phrases “fictive kin,” “self-starters,” or social networks with “hubs.” Such groupings may identify with the stated cause of a more formal organization, but they are, in fact, largely independent with little or no identifiable leadership, no hierarchy. In this instance, researchers are trying to understand events “on the ground,” to catch up with a shifting landscape when it comes to the “delivery” of “suicide” bombers. Formal organizations still operate, but they are being supplemented with alternative social groupings. Possible reasons for these changes are explored later. But first a look at some of the studies conducted to explain this phenomenon is in order. Let us begin with the concept, noted earlier, of “fictive kin.”

Atran, in a later work, writes that given that “humans evolved in small groups whose members were closely related, evolution favored a kin psychology designed to help out members of their groups.”¹⁴² The terminology of kinship, he argues, as in his earlier piece, has been extended to nonkin, to “imagined” kin to build strong cooperative ties. Devotion is extended “to a family-like group of friends and mentors who act and care for one another.”¹⁴³ Atran clearly locates the driver of sacrifice in social ties and “deep love of one’s group.”¹⁴⁴

For Atran, religious “martyrs” such as those found in Palestine and Iraq reflect group solidarity. “Professions of religious belief and adherence to its costly rituals,” he writes, “is a convincing statement of open-ended social commitment.”¹⁴⁵ Religious beliefs strengthen ties between “genetic strangers.” In support of this contention, Atran cites a recent set of studies in which researchers found that attendance at communal religious services, identified as acts of coalitional commitment, itself “a good index of strong group identity positively predicted support for suicide attacks.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, social ties, in this case religious, strengthen identity with others, which may heighten a willingness to support “suicide” bombings.

Marc Sageman, in his widely cited *Understanding Terror Networks*, is focused on transnationalist jihadists. With his sample size of 172, he sets out to identify what factors explain the decision to join the jihad and engage in “martyrdom” operations. Granted that, prior to joining, individuals may have felt a sense of frustration and grievance, for Sageman, these feelings alone are inadequate to explain their future commitment to jihad. Living outside their country of origin, it was the ties of friendship, the “spirit of easy brotherhood” that proved crucial.¹⁴⁷ Mosques provided a supportive and radicalizing venue. Mosques, writes Sageman, become a place to meet “brokers to the jihad.”¹⁴⁸ “[S]hared collective social identity and strong emotional feelings for the in-group” occur in cliques which “transform lives and...change the meaning and impact of friendship bonds that pave the way to joining the jihad.” For Sageman, it is these “intense relationships” that reshape one’s identity that are the central mechanism that explains the decision to join, fight, and die.¹⁴⁹

In his later book, *Leaderless Jihad*, beyond an extension to cover what he terms the “third wave” of jihadists in Europe that followed the Iraq invasion of 2003, Sageman continues his focus on social ties. Based on a larger data set of more than 500 individual profiles,

he concludes that social bonds, friendship, and kinship remain the crucial factors that explain the commitment to jihad.¹⁵⁰

The power of social ties may be granted; however, why these ties lead to a commitment to jihad for some individuals and fail to do so for others remains a question. Whether it is a question of timing or the specific life experiences of particular individuals that make them “susceptible” to such “brokers to the jihad” is unknown.

Nicole Argo, based on her many interviews over a year and a half in Gaza and the West Bank comes to a conclusion similar to Sageman, although her population of cases is quite different. As with Sageman, Argo downplays the importance of ideology, instead it is “emotion and social ties [that] precede the acquisition of an ideology.” She argues that “the data show that most jihadists did not come to the jihad through religion, or through doctrination. They come through family and friends. The motivation is communal.”¹⁵¹ Argo then disagrees with those such as Atran who have emphasized indoctrination by an organization such as Hamas as crucial to reshaping an individual’s sense of self and identity which then builds a willingness to die for the cause and Allah. Quintan Wiktorowicz agrees with Argo on this point. Evidence from studies and interviews conducted during the 1990s did support the indoctrination argument. But with the start of the Second Intifada, “The majority of suicide bombers since 2000 appear to be self-selected volunteer.” The group that sponsors them, Wiktorowicz states, is chosen by the individual due to social ties not their ideology.¹⁵² If correct, this implies what guides an individual is “who you know” not what a group believes. The organization functions as a conduit to enable an individual to do what he or she has already decided upon. Available evidence suggests this was the case with the 9/11 conspirators.¹⁵³

Where Wiktorowicz parts company with Argo, Atran, and Sageman is in the role he assigns to beliefs. Although he grants the emotional role played by social ties, he argues that individuals, particularly the “al-Qaeda types,” are “inspired more by their spiritual self-interest than by emotive bonds to fictive kin.”¹⁵⁴ Ideology, arrived at through socialization, led individuals to a commitment to sacrifice, to act to achieve God’s will and for individual benefits of martyrdom. For Wiktorowicz, these individuals are “rational true believers” whose act is not for any group but as “an act of worship.”¹⁵⁵ Incentives are not to be located in either the material or genetic world rather in the spiritual realm.

The mistake that Wiktorowicz makes is his failure to ground “martyrdom” within the doctrine of jihad. Jihad is a community response to a perceived threat to Islam and, depending on the circumstances, may require each individual to act in the name of Allah to protect the Muslim community (ummah) through his sacrifice. This is why *fatwas* are important in justifying such behavior. This action is not detached from the community. Looking at suicide attacks by Palestinians during the Second Intifada, Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger report that “while the number of suicide attacks perpetrated by established groups with hierarchical structures is on the decline, the number of attacks carried out by groups lacking an easily identifiable structure or an established leadership is on the rise. In the past five years, the latter groups initiated 6.4 times more suicide attacks than the former ones.”¹⁵⁶ For the authors these “horizontal networks” may or may not connect with any established organization. The “hubs” are “local operatives” who may not even know the extent of their network. Such networks may shift and change very quickly with the “leaders” largely unknown outside the network itself. One sees the importance of family and social ties as individuals are brought in by personal relationships. Such networks may operate in the name of a specific organization such as Hamas, but their operations are largely independent. Pedahzur and Perliger report that while these networks are all driven by the Palestinian struggle, the “hubs use the network’s ability to dispatch suicide bombers to gain territorial control or political dominance in a specific region for their network or family.”¹⁵⁷ The authors see little loyalty as “hubs” switch from one affiliation to another if they judge it in their interests to do so.¹⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, given how embedded these networks are in their respective communities, support of the community itself is deemed crucial.¹⁵⁹

Taking a step farther away from formal organizations is the analysis on “self-starters.” “This term,” writes Aidan Kirby, “refers to groups that have little or no affiliation with the original al-Qaeda network, made up of individuals who have never attended a formal terrorism training camp and whose attacks occur seemingly spontaneously.”¹⁶⁰ Kirby’s research focus is on the London bombers described as “an autonomous clique” in which the radicalization process occurred in an Islamic bookstore.¹⁶¹ For Kirby, clique identity trumps individual identity. He quotes Sageman on this point:

What do we know about suicide bombing?

[Cliques] are the social mechanism that puts pressure on prospective participants to join, defines a certain social reality for the ever more intimate friends, and facilitates the development of a shared collective social identity and strong emotional feelings for the in-group.¹⁶²

While Kirby, like Sageman, identifies social bonds as predating ideological development, a position open to disagreement, he also acknowledges the crucial role of “radical Islamic terrorism or *Jihadism*.”¹⁶³ With these individuals we see the reaction to a social situation in which they feel discriminated against and humiliated along with “humiliation-by-proxy” as identified by Khosrokhavar. The videotaped words of one of the bombers, Mohammad Sidique Khan, reflect this dynamic.

Our driving motivation doesn't come from the tangible commodities that this world has to offer . . . Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetrate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible . . . Until we feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight . . .¹⁶⁴

Javier Jordan's analysis of jihadi terrorism in Western Europe from 2001 to 2010 provides support for the “self-starter” narrative. He identifies 85 cases of which 56 or two-thirds show “no evidence that group members spent time at a training camp or at *jihadi* insurgency locations outside Western Europe.”¹⁶⁵ Jordan's data demonstrate a shift as of 2003, when there was an increase “in the numbers of incidents perpetrated by independent groups or individuals.”¹⁶⁶ Today, we see a similar phenomenon with individuals who claim inspiration from IS.

Organizations, though, still matter, particularly as those groups who affiliated with different organizations shifted from “al-Qaeda Central” to al-Zarqawi in Iraq or networks based in the Maghreb. The year 2006, Jordan reports, also saw “new organizations emerged on the European scene, among them al Shaba[a]b, TTP (Tehrik-Taleban Pakistan), al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba].”¹⁶⁷ The appearance of organizations earlier tied to specific nationalist or ethnic causes suggests, as Jordan notes, their commitment to a global jihadist movement.¹⁶⁸

What explains the emergence of independent groups, cells, or self-starters? One possible explanation is the war in Iraq, which seemed to have energized and mobilized individuals angered by the invasion of yet another Muslim country by Western forces, particularly those from the United States and Great Britain. Additionally, there is the spread of propaganda through often powerful audiovisual tapes that are meant to drive home the suffering of fellow Muslims. Internet forums aid in the radicalization process, as did the now-dead recruiter Anwar al-Awlaki based in Yemen. One could also add the existence of the “caliphate” as a powerful motivating force. For individuals responsive to such forces, their Muslim identity appears to trump all others, and so a sense of vengeance against the “others” judged responsible. Add to these “positive” messages that pull individuals toward taking action with the “negative” push messages received by disenfranchised, disconnected, nonintegrated individuals in many European societies and the combination for some is a powerful mix.

Al-Qaeda?

What is clear is that even as the organizational structure of al-Qaeda has been badly damaged, the power of the ideology to galvanize individuals has remained, particularly with the assistance of skilled propagandists. Individuals willing to sacrifice their lives in the name of Islam, along with amorphous political objectives, remain. “Even before Bin Laden's death,” writes Michael Ryan, “al-Qaeda had become a brand, an idea and not an organization with a command-and-control system.”¹⁶⁹

The last few years have seen reports that a rebranding may be taking place. Aaron Zelin reports on “a new trend sweeping the world of Jihadism,” the adoption by several groups of the name Ansar al-Sharia—supporters of Islamic law. With the first Ansar al-Sharia group in Yemen, others have sprung up in Tunisia and Libya, where there are a number of groups with similar names, along with groups in Morocco and Egypt.¹⁷⁰ Letters found at the Abbottabad refuge of Bin Laden show that consideration was being given to a possible name change. The letters, released in September 2012, demonstrate “Bin Laden is not in sync on the operational level with regional jihadi groups,” writes one of the authors of the report that accompanied the release.¹⁷¹

In addition, there have been recent calls for unity among different groups.¹⁷² But what this portends for the future is not clear. Certainly what is the case is the

marked weakness of the al-Qaeda organization, along with the emergence of a host of groups in different countries with different means, but a similar ideology, to some extent building on the ideology promulgated by Bin Laden and Zawahiri.¹⁷³ Whether this means that al-Qaeda is likely to cease to exist, even as a brand name, is unknown, but it does suggest the need to be aware of new regional groups that may prove a challenge as they continue a fight in the name of Islam. It is also not clear whether all groups will adopt “suicide” missions as a tactic, although some have done so.

Islamic State

IS is in a real sense an organization apart. It is a direct descendent of al-Qaeda in Iraq but clearly went beyond the reach of al-Qaeda. In the end, the break from al-Qaeda in 2014 reflects the differences in tactics undertaken by the two organizations, along with the visions they represent for the future of the jihadi movement. For al-Qaeda, the restoration of the caliphate is a long-term goal; not so for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Also, while al-Qaeda rationalizes its actions in terms of self-defense of the Muslim community and Islam, IS speaks of revenge. This commitment to immediate action is what seems to have attracted thousands of fighters, many of whom sought “martyrdom” in the name of the restoration of the caliphate and the protection of Islam. Reports of “martyrdom” in aid of the fight in Syria surfaced as early as 2012.¹⁷⁴

Unlike al-Qaeda, IS evolved into a proto-state with thousands of fighters engaged in battle. Beyond pitched battles, however, IS also utilized bombings, including “suicide” bombings against designated enemies in both Iraq and Syria. As with al-Qaeda, so, too, IS propaganda works to sustain and spread “a culture of martyrdom and suicide attacks.”¹⁷⁵ IS media outlets have urged sympathizers in the West, with obvious success, to stay home and engage in actions against infidels in their own countries rather than travel to Syria. These “inspired warriors,” such as Mohamed Merah, a French citizen of Algerian descent, writes Burke, saw that “being killed is a duty and . . . the murder of unarmed civilians is legitimate.”¹⁷⁶ Whether inspired by al-Qaeda or IS “martyrdom” is a powerful cultural force. “You only die once, why not make it martyrdom?” so asks an IS recruitment video.¹⁷⁷

The bottom line with respect to the emergence of groups of self-starters, along with a host of new groups, is that the environment has become extremely complex thereby increasing the difficulty of those whose job it is

to track and identify threats. The attack on the American Consulate in Benghazi, as well as the recent spate of attacks in Europe, underscores this point.

Comprehensive frameworks

There are three scholars who have set out to move beyond a focus on one element and forward a framework meant to combine key relevant factors in an effort to provide a multi-causal, multi-level mode. The authors are Rashmi Singh, Mohammed Hafez, and As-saf Moghadam. None of these researchers would claim to have developed a theory with testable hypotheses. Instead, each has worked to identify key variables and links meant to gain a more complete picture of the “suicide” bombing phenomenon. We begin with Rashmi Singh and her case study on Hamas.

Singh identifies her framework as initiating “a fourth generation literature on suicide bombings.”¹⁷⁸ First-generation works, for Singh, identify suicide bombings as the acts of deranged fanatics. Second-generation studies center on the strategic logic of organizations that choose to adopt the tactic while largely ignoring the individuals themselves. Third-generation works focus on the meaning assigned to martyrdom by the individuals while locating the bombers in a specific cultural and social context. Here the motivations of individuals are identified as different from those of the organization that sponsored them.¹⁷⁹ Her self-identified fourth-generation approach “assigns both organizational and individual rationality and motives equal importance in understanding the emergence and sustainability of suicide bombing campaigns.”¹⁸⁰ Singh sees a dialectic between the two levels with the attacks “a complex combination of expressive and instrumental violence” for both organizations and individuals.¹⁸¹ Finally, she argues that for both individuals and organizations there are “three broadly conflating concerns i.e. *survival, competition, and retaliation*” that reflect both instrumental and expressive “facets of violence.”¹⁸²

In her detailed analysis of Hamas, Singh notes, as has Abufarha,¹⁸³ that the “norm of militant heroic martyrdom as a component of Palestinian identity was far more embedded in society than the organization(s) articulating or escalating it.” Thus, organizations such as Hamas are not just engaged in strategic rational calculation, but its leaders reflect the norms of the Palestinian society. This is an important but neglected insight by Singh that organizations, like the individuals who martyr themselves, are products of and embedded in

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a larger society. Too often organizations' leaders are viewed as "calculators" separate from the larger societal forces that shape their actions. This is not to suggest that leaders do not engage in calculations of effect and effectiveness for clearly they do, but it is important to remember they are members of a larger community to which they do have connections.

Beyond Singh's important exploration of the key links between rational and expressive elements, it is her underscoring of the embedded nature of organizations that enriches our understanding. Such an approach can certainly be applied to other ethno-nationalist conflicts, although it does not, as noted earlier, provide us with a theory to be tested.

With Mohammed Hafez we have a researcher who began with an investigation of "suicide" bombings during the Palestinian Second Intifada which began in 2000 and then moved on to explore *Suicide Bombers in Iraq*. With the former, Hafez presents "three levels of analysis: individual motivations, organizational imperatives, and societal conflicts."¹⁸⁴ A different set of variables is introduced for each of the three levels. There follows a detailed description of events during the intifada.

Without doubt Hafez is correct, as is Singh, that there are multiple factors that must be considered. However, as with Singh, these elements are not integrated into a model or theoretical construct. This is not to take away from the thoughtful analysis conducted, but only to note the absence of a testable theory. Hafez does state though that this three-level approach "is instructive for studying suicide terrorism and extreme political violence in other contexts such as Iraq and Chechnya."¹⁸⁵ Do we see a similar approach with the application of a three-level analysis in his study of "suicide" bombing in Iraq?

The situation in Iraq is markedly different than the situation in the Palestinian case. In Iraq, we have a case of transnational "martyrs." Hafez does reference a three-level analysis, as in the Palestinian study, but there is a slight but important change. In the Palestinian case, the three levels are the individual, the organization, and societal conflict. In the Iraq case, "societal conflict" is replaced with "sociopolitical facilitators' of activism."¹⁸⁶ The shift is reflective of the very different dynamics of the Iraq case. Hafez also adopts a social movement approach that "involve[s] actors in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; linked by dense informal networks [and sharing] a distinct collective identity."¹⁸⁷ This departs from the approach adopted for the Palestinian case to account for the

mobilization by different networks outside Iraq that facilitated the transit of Muslims into Iraq to engage in "martyrdom" operations.

The transnational character of "suicide" bombings in Iraq underscore a qualitative difference between a domestic population from which martyrs are drawn and a transnational movement made up of Muslims intent on dying for the larger Muslim community judged under attack. Hafez acknowledges as much when he suggests that "analysts may have to refocus."¹⁸⁸ In his conclusion, Hafez refocuses his analysis toward the research on social movements with the concepts of "political opportunity structures, strategic framing, mobilization structures, and repertoires of action, modularity, and diffusion."¹⁸⁹ Here we see a realization that a framework that might clarify such acts in an ethno-nationalist setting may prove inadequate when attempting to explain a transnational phenomenon, whether the subject of study are Iraq's "suicide" bombers or those associated with al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda affiliates, or IS.

The Globalization of Martyrdom by Assaf Moghadam is an effort to identify the causes of the diffusion of "suicide" missions throughout the world. The author differentiates between local and global patterns. Local patterns reflect "identifiable, long-standing" conflicts where "religious, ethno-nationalist or secular" ideologies dominate. The actors are subnational and targets are limited. Goals are well understood and similarly limited. Groups that fit this description include Hezbollah, Hamas, Fatah, and the Tamil Tigers. Global patterns for Moghadam are circumstances where the nature of the conflicts are "short term" and difficult to identify. Transnational actors are driven by "Salafi-Jihadist" ideology with few or no limits on potential targets. Goals are sweeping, such as the establishment of a caliphate.¹⁹⁰

For Moghadam, there are two causes of the spread of the adoption of "suicide" bombing by a growing number of groups: al-Qaeda and Salafi-Jihadist ideology. Specifically, he reports that al-Qaeda became "an actor with a global scope."¹⁹¹ Salafist-Jihadist ideology "provided the much needed theological, religious, and moral justification for the employment of al-Qaeda's suicide mission."¹⁹²

Moghadam's argument is a convincing one as he is able to link these two factors to a variety of organizations tied to the al-Qaeda "brand name." Interestingly, he includes in his survey of organizations the London Bombers which many other analysts identify as "self-starters" associated with no formal organizations.

Moghadam argues there was evidence that two of the bombers traveled to Pakistan, where they may have received training. However, the evidence is not strong, although what is quite likely is the bombers were “inspired by al-Qaeda’s ideology.”¹⁹³ What is missing from Moghadam’s analysis, not surprising given the focus on identifiable organizations, is the appearance of unaffiliated small numbers of individuals who commit to the cause and ideology of al-Qaeda without any formal organizational base. As noted earlier, this phenomenon may well be the wave of the future.

All three of these studies have added to our understanding of the dynamics of “suicide” bombings as a tactic. Unfortunately, we have yet to see the development of a model or theory that would strengthen the field as a whole.

Summing up

Without a doubt, we have learned a fair amount about the forces behind “suicide” missions, particularly when it comes to a better understanding of organizational dynamics in an ethno-nationalist setting. What is essential is both a strategic calculation that concludes that such a tactic is of value to the purposes of the organization, of its survival and growth, as well as a powerful ideology and narrative that provides a strong justification for its use. Clearly religion has proven particularly efficacious. Finally, we know that although a degree of popular support is desirable, what is minimally required is no public condemnation by a group’s purported constituency. In the cases of the Basque ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna) and Northern Ireland’s Provisional Irish Republican Army, both ethno-nationalist organizations which did not choose a “suicide” bombing campaign, one or more of these factors was absent.

Are we able, then, to predict when an ethno-nationalist organization is likely to seriously consider and/or adopt such a tactic? At this point, we do have the knowledge to assign a high probability to such a contingency. What is necessary though is an in-depth understanding of specific organizations, something that may be difficult to achieve. Note, for example, the Tamil Tigers, where knowledge of the organization was hard to come by for many years.

If an informed judgment is reached that organization X might well be disposed to begin a “suicide” bombing campaign, then what? One possible response is an effective propaganda campaign addressed to the relevant constituent population to encourage condemnation.

But here what would be critical is the source of such a campaign. If instituted by a party held in a strongly negative light, then it might prove inadequate. An effort to foil or undercut a justificatory ideology would require highly regarded leaders of the community, either religious or otherwise to publicly condemn any such tactic. Convincing an organization’s leaders that such a move would threaten their survival would also provide a barrier to adoption. Of course, negotiations meant to change the conditions under which a group is suffering would also assist, assuming there is no “spoiler,” as was the case in the 1990s with Hamas. But, in the end, any or all of these require thoughtful, skilled plans that all too often are absent.

What about the small groups of individuals, the self-starters, the newly emergent groups? This presents a major challenge given how quickly and quietly such groups can come together. Good intelligence is obviously essential. But to expect any government’s myriad intelligence agencies to be able to identify and respond to such situations is problematic. This becomes very difficult when we are looking at volatile settings such as in Libya today, where parts of the country have no functioning government security forces in place. Even in the stable environment of Western Europe, finding and tracking individuals remains a work in progress with clear success stories, but failures as well.

The rise of cells or self-starters is likely to be a major source of future attacks with the odds of finding and stopping all acts nearly impossible. What remains true with respect to some individual Muslims is the continued power of first the al-Qaeda narrative, now joined by IS, of the humiliation and oppression of Muslims around the globe. Effective efforts to counter that narrative remains largely absent. And, as long as events “on the ground” seem to substantiate the accuracy of the narrative, its force will remain intact.

Finally, there is the question of the identification of specific individuals or personality types likely to sacrifice themselves in this manner for a larger cause. The search for a particular personality type is likely to fail given the enormous difficulty associated with efforts to spot potential bombers. In fact, the setting where there have been efforts to try and arrive at such a type have been among Palestinians, a largely captive population, and even in this case, as noted earlier, the ability of officials to identify likely bombers remains out of reach. Little work has been done in other locations for the obvious reason that it would be exceedingly dangerous to do so. In some situations, such as occurred during

the Iraq War, there was no way to be able to increase understanding of transnational martyrs beyond assigning them the general motivation of defending Islam and fellow Muslims. Today in Iraq and Afghanistan, the bombings continue with the apparent intent to destabilize existing regimes, and terrify those judged to be enemies of the “true” Islam. Of the bombers themselves, little is known. Perhaps, after the fact, small self-starters’ lives could be mined for information about their emotional state, but that still leaves enormous holes in our knowledge.

Rather than continuing to try to tie down “suicide” bombings to a particular type of individual, it might be more fruitful to explore the cultural norms and narrative history of any particular society. Here a thorough researcher might come away with an understanding that would enable us to identify a particular society, or sector of society, whose members might be vulnerable to the power of a narrative of sacrifice. Variation between and among cultures on this score is likely. What the future requires with respect to the adoption of “suicide” missions is the sensitivity of scholars and observers to better understand both the narratives and the circumstances within which such actions occur.

Development of a cultural model would represent a marked advance in our ability to identify where the relative probability of an ethno-nationalist conflict turning to such a tactic may occur. However, that does not address the much more difficult and elusive nature of other circumstances, particularly self-starter groups or specific individuals who cross borders in order to protect and/or defend a valued cause. What ties each of these situations together is the power of a message that serves to trigger such a response. And here we find ourselves back at the level of the individual and all the attendant difficulties described earlier.

An interesting question is whether the field of “suicidology,” the study of nonterrorist, nonpolitical suicides, might offer a window into understanding the act of “suicide” terrorism. Psychological autopsies are conducted after a suicide in order to understand the reason for the death “to ascertain why a death occurred at a particular time” and to be better able to predict future suicides.¹⁹⁴

In a recent study, researchers found that

Suicide completers were significantly more likely than comparison subjects to have a depressive disorder, a substance abuse disorder, and to have experienced interpersonal conflict in the months leading up to their death. A discriminant function

analysis revealed that the combination of demographic variables, recent stressful life events, and psychiatric diagnoses best discriminated between suicide completers and comparison subjects.¹⁹⁵

Beyond stressful life events, which certainly can describe some situations in which “suicide” bombing has taken place, the other factors do not match what is known about the “martyrs.” The “martyrs” are not unmarried, elderly males, the most likely demographic group to commit suicide. Neither have they yet been diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder which “approximately 80–90% of individuals” have been so diagnosed.¹⁹⁶ “The prediction of suicide remains a complex and difficult task” write the authors.¹⁹⁷ The same can be said of efforts to explain and/or predict the individual’s decision to undertake a “martyrdom” operation.

What should be emphasized, though, in any discussion of suicides or “martyrs” is that suicide is a solitary act which often violates a social code. “Martyrdom,” writes K. M. Fierke, “in contrast to suicide, is associated with an act of witness to truth or injustice.” The martyr “on some level chooses suffering and death in order to demonstrate absolute commitment to a cause.”¹⁹⁸

The theoretical challenges are enormous, although a possible avenue that can be applied, particularly to transnational movements, is social movement theory in one of its many variations. Hafez, of course, does just this in his study of “suicide” bombers in Iraq. The difficulty, as Hafez acknowledges, is there is no theory, just different analytical frameworks. Still, a careful application of such a framework across multiple cases may assist in efforts to explain the forces that lead individuals to engage in violence under such circumstances. But what remains uncertain is why individuals choose to “martyr” themselves rather than to fight in the conventional way. On balance, both cultural analysis and social movement approaches do offer a means to develop better theoretical grounds than has been the case to date. With the proviso that the individual level remains problematic.

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