

PROFILING SUICIDE TERRORISTS

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Key Words:

Terrorism, suicide, sociology, politics, strategy

Abstract

The causal logic of suicide as a tool of terrorism occurs on three levels; the strategic, the social, and the individual level. The strategic level includes political and policy level considerations and includes nationalistic considerations. The strategic desired outcome of the action is to draw attention, or garner support, for a given political goal. The majority of modern suicide incidents (57%) are secular in nature and are not affiliated with religious organizations. At the social level the considerations are also nationalistic and rarely include irrational or fanatic behavior. Individually the motivation for action involves an altruistic social perspective. This indicates that the action party is driven by a high level of social integration and respect for community values.

The misconception of suicide terrorists as religiously oriented fanatics that have underlying mental considerations and low education or social status is no longer accurate. Recent studies have narrowed the profile to identify individuals who are not socially isolated, have emotional and familial ties to their community, and include an increasing number of females. This paper will explore the social constructs of suicide terrorism and attempt to identify characteristics at the organizational and individual level that make profiling suicide terrorists more accurate.

The Ideology of Terrorist Organizations

Options for expression are the foundation of a free society. Without these options, because of coercive government or oppressive ideologies, expression in its peaceful form is stilted. Terrorist organizations often no longer view themselves as part of their societal or governmental structure, nor do they view their enemies as members of governments or civil societies. Terrorist organizations, and members within terrorist organizations, have a subjective interpretation of the world. Their perspective, often narrowly focused on single objectives, give rise to the perception of limited options for action. However, at no point do these organization and members lack logic and the ability to reason. Fanaticism can include moral absolutes to a given agenda, but does

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not mean that irrationality or madness is at the helm. Martha Crenshaw, the seminal terrorist sociologist, writes (1995), “The variable from which their belief systems are formed include their political and social environments, cultural traditions, and the internal dynamics of their clandestine groups. Their convictions may seem irrational or delusional to society in general, but the terrorists may nevertheless act rationally in their commitment to acting on their convictions.”

Given this perspective it is fair to acknowledge that terrorists, who use violence in extreme measure and often against innocent and symbolic populations, rarely view themselves as terrorisms. More often, within the narrow lens of their ideology, whether it is anarchism, Islamic fundamentalism, or revolutionary nationalism, these groups regard themselves as liberators, holy soldiers, martyrs and in all cases legitimate fighters for a noble and righteous cause.

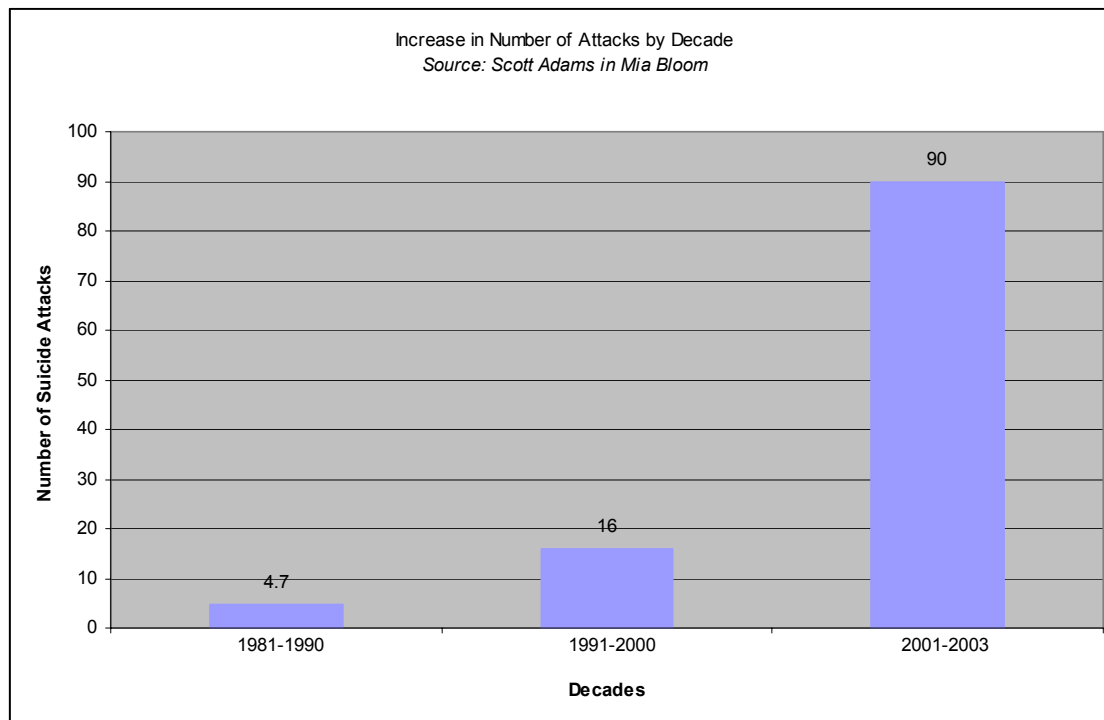
Despite these commonalities it is impossible to create a typical or consistent profile of a terrorist, or a terrorist organization. Post (1985) noted that, “Behavioral scientists attempting to understand the psychology of individuals drawn to this violent political behavior have not succeeded in identifying a unique “terrorist mindset”. People who have joined terrorist groups have come from a wide range of cultures, nationalities, and ideological causes, all strata of society, and diverse professions.” Crucial to an understanding is the concept of perspective – the idea that we all have a view of the world, a view of ourselves, a view of others, and a view of ourselves in relation to others – which are all important to understand focused ideologies such as fundamentalism (Monroe and Kredie, 1997). The key concept is that fundamentalists see themselves not as individuals but rather as symbols.

In 1978 a group of psychoanalytically oriented theorists performed a field study, long before the outbreak of modern suicide bombing, to systematically analyze the approach to terror. The study was based on a series of interviews with Palestinian Arabs living in refugee camps in Gaza, Jordan, Cairo, and Jerusalem. The interview, and the foundational hypothesis was, “real or imagined threat or injury to the nation may be perceived by the individual as a danger or humiliation to the self, and that the individual response to the threat is substantially rooted in the distinctive psychological dynamics of self and its extensions” (GAP, 1978). The core theory used to explain this behavior was Kohut’s narcissistic rage phenomenon occurs when the self-object fails to live up to absolute expectations. Although narcissistic rage occurs in some levels in all individuals, in those for whom a sense of absolute control over an archaic environment is indispensable, the narcissistic rage takes on violent forms. (Kohut, 1972)

Historical Trends in Suicide Attacks

The past decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number and scope of targeted suicide bombing attacks. Today, terrorist organizations rely increasingly on suicide attacks to achieve major political objectives, and attacks are growing in both frequency and diversity of location (Pape, 2003). Given the nature of these attacks there is an unmitigated success even in the event that limited damages are done. These attacks, regardless of their eventually kill/injured rate often inspire religious or ideological zeal, which in turn further destabilizes societies (Ganor, 2001). Because an attack with low kill/injury rate can affect public moral, suicide bombing causes not only direct damage to individuals but also severe psychological damage to the population at large. The fear

of an attack, which is often greater than the threat itself, is largely the result of its unpredictability (Grimland, et. al, 2006).



Suicidal behavior, especially as a delivery method for a weapon, is not easily definable. Suicide in general can be divided between those who attempt suicide and those who succeed and die by suicide. If the intention of murder, in addition to suicide, is added to the event there is another distinction between those who are ready to die, those who seek to die, and those who are indoctrinated into suicide (Grimland, et. al, 2006). In addition, because the perpetrators death is a precondition for the success of the mission, analyzing perpetrators post event is almost impossible.

The profile of suicide bombers is as reflective of the population at large, as terrorist organizations. Merari's 2004 study of Palestinian terrorists found no differences in socioeconomic or educational factors from the general Palestinian population. One factor of note was the predominance of male suicide bombers but that has changed over the past ten year to include women martyrs. In addition, many martyrs are often unmarried, and many organizations routinely reject candidates who are under 18 years of age (Grimland, et. al, 2006). According to Merari the typical Palestinian suicide terrorist is, "religious, normal, polite and serious. Motivations include the effectiveness of suicide bombings as a military strategy, nationalistic pride, the need to revenge national and personal humiliation, and hatred of Israel and America." Ironically Moghadam's 2003 study reports that Hamas and PIJ (Palestinian Islamic Jihad) recruiters will not select candidates they deem to have suicidal tendencies. One PIJ member quoted in the study said, "In order to be a Martyr bomber, you have to want to live." (Grimland, et. al, 2006).

Women's role in suicide bombing has dramatically increased in the past decade. Often chosen for their innocent appearance (dressing as if pregnant), the reduced likelihood of a full body search because of proximity taboos, and their greater psychological impact.

In addition, Laqueur (1987) noted that female terrorists are more loyal and fanatical than their male counterparts. To date the major terrorist organizations around the world use female suicide bombers including but not limited to; PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) in Turkey, the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in Sri Lanka, the SSNP (Syrian Social Nationalist Party) in Lebanon, the PIJ (Palestinian Islamic Jihad) in the Middle East, and Hamas in Sudan, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. As reported by Beyler in 2003, female suicide bombers had accounted for:

- 30-40% of suicide bombings by LTTE
- 73% of suicide bombings by PKK
- 41% of the suicide bombings by SSNP

The role for women in these traditionally patriarchal societies affords few freedoms to women. Women are traditionally defined in terms of their male family members and are often formally uneducated. In groups such as the PKK women's involvement means both ethnic and gender emancipations. They are given equal status to their male counterparts and often undergo extensive military training. (Grimland, et. al, 2006). Because of their physical limitations in regular military operations, suicide missions offer them an opportunity to prove equality and worth to the organization.

Beyler (2003) studies extensively the role of the female "Birds of Freedom" suicide commandos as part of the Sri Lankan LTTE, who has between 5000-9000 female members. Beyler indicated that these women were considered equal to their male counterparts, given extensive training, and were sometimes even recruited as children. Many of the women were former rape victims and viewed the suicide missions as a way of restoring their self and public esteem (Beyler, 2003).

Of special note is the Chechen organization of "Black Windows" and almost exclusively female terrorist organization committed to the Chechen insurgency. Traditionally the Black Widows are sisters, mother, or wives or Chechen men who have died in battles with federal troops. Also included are women who have been raped, beaten, or otherwise "disgraced" by Russian troops. Their first attack on June 9, 2000 by Hawa Barayev killed 27 Russian Special Forces, a phenomenal success rate for a suicide attack. In 2003 the Black Windows were responsible for over 165 deaths in six suicide attacks (Bloom, 2005).

The role of female suicide bombers has also taken the Middle Eastern terrorist organizations by storm. Of debate is who was first, but Bloom, who has done extensive studies in the Middle East, identifies her as a 17 year -old Lebanese girl who in 1985 blew herself up near an Israeli convoy as part of the secular SSNP, a pro Syrian-Lebanese organization. These women, who are metaphorically and literally dying to participate, have caught both the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and Palestinian organizations off guard. Originally denouncing women's violent role in Islamic fundamentalist organizations, Palestinian clerics have been forced to issue retrospective religious rulings (*Fatwas*) to now support women's roles.

Mitigation and Prevention of Terrorist Events

Rational choice theory as a tool to mitigate against terrorist organizations is not new (Anderton and Carter, 2005), and (Cornish and Clarke, 1987). Weaknesses to this idea have included social, psychological, and cultural influences. More importantly, rational

choice theory does not account for why only a few individuals, among potentially millions in virtually identical situations, become terrorists. Individuals with passion, pride, remorse, and unique social reconstitution pressures, will often trump rationality. When behaviors deviate from the predicted base, understanding the mindset of a terrorist or a suicide bomber, become impossible to understand.

If insanity nor sociopathy nor rational choice can fully account for terrorist behaviors, what explanation is there? Crenshaw attempts to answer this by stating that although terrorists rarely exhibit psychological disorders, they may exhibit identifiable psychological traits and may have been influenced by identifiable social factors. This also raises the question of options, and how a rational person can turn to extremist violence. To be both politically motivated and “reach the point of no return” where violence and suicide is the only option requires a unique set of environmental factors. As noted before, not all suicide violence is religiously oriented, moving a martyr closer to their chose deity. Rather, the predominance of motivations is suicide as a military strategy. While often effective in its kill/injury rate, and effective in stirring up social passion for a cause, suicide terrorism is still an expensive undertaking when the time and labor to prepare a suicide mission is calculated.

Probably the greatest affect of the suicide mission is the continued platitude of the agent themselves. Wafa Idris, the first female suicide bomber is the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, who blew herself up outside a café in 2002, is still revered as one of the great martyrs of her time. Despite her low mission success (she killed herself and an 81 year man) she is the principle reason for *fatwas* allowing women to participate in suicide missions. Posters or her in montage and in portrait are easily available and a movie regarding her life is currently under production. This is particularly relevant where the primary target of a suicide bombing is not the target itself, but the continued recruitment of new volunteers.

The path to violent action is never thought of as the first solution to a new problem. Rational actors are forced to violence by lack of other means to gain attention to their cause. The halt of terrorism can be gained by the presence of options; such as electing opposition via popular vote, providing legitimate voice to an organizations perspective, or reducing the environmental conditions contributing to a sense of oppression through education and political choice.

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