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Understanding Suicide Terrorism: Insights from Psychology, Lessons from History

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If in January 2000, you had told someone that in the coming decade the UK would fall victim to a sustained campaign of suicide bombings carried out by Islamist extremists most of whom were born and raised in England (and many of whom had actually been raised Christians) it is unlikely anyone would have believed you. The UK was no stranger to terrorism at this time. Memories of IRA terrorism were fresh, the most lethal bombing of the entire Troubles occurred in 1998, while the 1990s had witnessed a series of massive truck bombings on the mainland. Terrorism then was a familiar creature. But suicide attacks? Surely not.

Yet, here we are in the midst of a sustained campaign of suicide bombing. Attacks and attempted attacks are now taking place on an annual basis. The terrorist failures, thankfully, outnumber the successes, but the successes cause enough damage and death to give serious pause for thought. The IRA never killed as many in one attack as four inexperienced bombers managed on July 7 2005. That we have not had repeated slaughters is the result only of intensive investigation and pure luck. That luck cannot hold forever and the plots keep coming.

How then does one understand this new threat, a threat which at first glance seems so alien to anything which has preceded it on these shores? How do we understand this new enemy? In the past thirty years, at least 20 different terrorist groups in 19 separate countries have used suicide tactics. Suicide attacks have killed over 8,000 people, maimed nearly 40,000 more and inflicted economic damage now conservatively estimated to be close to £100 billion (and far higher than this by some estimates) (Pape, 2005; Hafez, 2007; Silke, 2003). Suicide terrorism has struck across the globe; attacks have been carried out in both North and South

America, in the Middle East, in Europe, in Africa and in Asia. More than any other terrorist tactic, suicide assaults are the ones most likely to result in fatalities among the terrorist's targets, and they are also the assaults most difficult for authorities to defend against. Quite simply, suicide attacks are the most potent tactic in the modern terrorist's arsenal.

In order to prevent and combat suicide terrorism one first needs a clear understanding of suicide terrorists. However, such an understanding is often badly lacking in the West. Myth and innuendo dominate much of the wider perception of who suicide terrorists are, what drives them, how terrorist groups view and organise these tactics and what might be done to prevent and deter such extremists. Instead, informed and balanced writing on suicide terrorism is rare; drowned out in a deluge of material which paints the bombers as deranged fanatics, brainwashed and duped into acts of incomprehensible violence.

On 7 July 2005 the first Islamist suicide bombings in Europe were carried out in the UK. Four suicide bombers (three of whom were British born) detonated bombs in London during the morning rush hour. Fifty-two people were killed by the bombers and more than 700 people were maimed and injured. Exactly two weeks later, on 21 July, more extremists attempted to carry out a second wave of suicide attacks on London's transport system but this time the devices failed to detonate and no-one was killed. Further attempts to carry out suicide attacks in the UK have followed.

The fact that a growing number of 'home grown' terrorists were willing to carry out suicide attacks represented a disturbing (and to many a deeply surprising) development and left the authorities and others struggling to understand the radicalization process which can produce such extremists within the relatively stable and prosperous states of Western Europe. It is somehow easier to understand a suicide bomber emerging from communities mired in very violent conflicts in deprived parts of the world. That an extreme environment can produce extreme acts is understandable. But how individuals born, raised and living in the stable and comparatively prosperous worlds of the west, can then turn to suicide terrorism is much more difficult to answer. The role that the environment plays is less apparently obvious. The door seems open to interpretations based on internal psychology, on mental illness and abnormal personalities. In truth, environment is still the key factor but it takes more effort to realise this (Silke, 2008).

One of the most powerful myths about modern suicide terrorism is that it is at essence a product of Islam. The argument that suicide terrorism is a uniquely Islamic phenomenon quickly dissolves by even a cursory examination of history. While there is malaise in that great religion which has helped witness the rise of al Qaeda and its brethren, one does not need to draw upon the Koran alone to justify suicide attacks. Indeed, the first recorded suicide attack that history provides us with is not from an Islamic warrior but rather from a Jewish King. In the Bible, the Old Testament provides a detailed account of the death of the Jewish King and hero Samson. Captured by his enemies, the Philistines, tortured and mutilated, Samson was taken to their main hall to be tortured in public yet again:

And Samson said unto the lad that held him by the hand, Suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house standeth, that I may lean upon them. Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport.

And Samson called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord GOD, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.

And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left.

And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life

(The Holy Bible: King James Version, 2000).

Thus, according to the Bible, in this one act of destruction, Samson killed as many people (men, women and children if the phrase “lad” is an indication) as the 9/11 hijackers killed in their efforts in 2001. What is telling, however, is that the Bible does not condemn Samson’s actions. On the contrary, Samson’s suicide is presented as an act of redemption as well as of vengeance, which is interesting given the general Judea-Christian proscriptions ascribed to suicide. While the Bible in other places does prohibit killing and suicide, it is quite clear in these particular passages that Samson’s actions were condoned. He asked God for strength and this was granted. Thus, for a Christian or Jew who questions whether suicide killing can

be sanctioned by their religion, the story of Samson provides explicit evidence that it can (even when women and children are among the victims). Clearly, it is not just Islam which can provide mixed messages on this issue.

Close examination of most major cultures will throw up examples like Samson. Heroes who sacrifice themselves for a cause are a recurring motif in most societies (Silke, 2006). Individuals and groups who resist in the face of hopeless odds and certain death are heralded as icons of courage and honour. Wider pride is taken from their defiance. Consider for example, the 300 Spartans who refused to surrender to a Persian Army perhaps 250,000 strong at the battle of Thermopylae in 480BC. Nearly 2500 years later we continue to write books and make films of this battle and in every case it is the Spartans who are portrayed as the heroes.

Suicide terrorists are in many respects the modern inheritors of this legacy. They and their supporters certainly see their actions as heroic, courageous and noble (Silke, 2004). One of the obstacles for understanding suicide killing is that if you do not sympathize with the cause, it is difficult to see the perpetrator as anything but an evil psychopath at one level or at best as a vulnerable person who has been cynically manipulated and brainwashed. Yet if there is some sympathy with the cause, then such explanations begin to ring hollow.

For example, if you had the opportunity to kill Adolf Hitler in 1943 (and thus end not only the military conflict but also the genocide of the Holocaust) but that you would have to sacrifice your own life in the attempt, would you do it? What would you think of someone who did agree to do this? Would you think of such a suicide bomber as a hero, sacrificing himself for clearly just and sufficient reasons? Or would he be a brainwashed fanatic, coerced or 'radicalised' into killing himself this way?

On March 20, 1943, Rudolph-Christoph von Gersdoff, faced just this dilemma. He was a German army officer, a veteran of fighting on the Eastern Front and he was scheduled to escort Adolf Hitler and other leading Nazis through a museum exhibition in Berlin of captured Soviet weaponry. Only a few days before the exhibition tour, Gersdoff was summoned to a meeting with a senior officer involved in plots against Hitler. When Gersdoff appeared at the meeting:

Tresckow spoke “with the utmost gravity” about the situation and the “absolute necessity” of saving Germany from destruction. Then he abruptly broached the question of whether Gersdoff would undertake an assassination attempt in which he would probably be blown up himself. Gersdoff reflected briefly and agreed (Fest, 1996, p.195).

Hitler visited the exhibition in the company of Goring, Himmler, Donitz and Keitel. When Gersdoff saw Hitler approaching he ignited the fuse to the bomb hidden under his clothes, and then kept close to the Fuhrer as he walked among the exhibits. However, the rushed nature of the operation – involving as it did only a few days planning and preparation – had not given the plotters enough time to acquire a short fuse to detonate the explosives. Instead, Gersdoff had to use a ten minute fuse.

Gersdoff attempted to delay the Fuhrer’s progress by explaining the significance of the different exhibits, but Hitler showed little interest. He rushed through the halls. To everyone’s surprise, after only two minutes the Fuhrer left the building through a side door. Appalled, Gersdoff could only rush to the nearest toilets, where he ripped out the fuse to the bomb.

So what do we make of Gersdoff? Was he misguided? Evil? A hero? Your immediate reaction will probably depend a great deal on how you view his cause. If you think that killing Hitler was justified under the circumstances then Gersdoff’s actions will seem more reasonable and acceptable, and his willingness to sacrifice himself in the attempt an indication of enormous personal courage.

Suicide terrorists today believe that they are fighting an evil as great as the one Gersdoff saw in Hitler. As a result, they see suicide actions as sometimes being necessary and justified. Certainly these are themes which occur repeatedly in the video testimonies many suicide terrorists record before their mission. For example, the first confirmed British suicide bombing occurred in 2002 when two British nationals carried out a suicide attack in Tel Aviv on behalf of Hamas. In a video testimony released by Hamas after the attack the two bombers spoke to the camera in a more informal and free-flowing manner than was usually the case. This was especially the case with Hanif the older of the two men who did most of the talking. Together they addressed a number of key themes:

(1) providing clear acknowledgement that they were about to carry out a martyrdom operation

“Fellow Muslims, we left Britain to look for martyrdom.”

(2) Justifying this attack on the basis of Israeli provocations

“[Jews] are raping our women, killing our children”

“We will take revenge and we will get the Jews and the Crusaders out of the land of Islam.”

(3) Encouraging viewers to support the attacks and possibly become bombers themselves.

“You Muslims are sitting in your houses, watching whatever is happening here to your Muslim brothers in Palestine. We want to be martyrs for Allah and we want you to be martyrs for Allah as well. ... OK, even if you're not going to fight with us, please at least look into the facts ... “

The video tackles issues such as whether the bombers were coerced, tricked or brainwashed into carrying out the attack. The bombers highlight that they know it is a suicide mission – ruling out the possibility that they were tricked or duped – they emphasise that they volunteered or actively sought out the mission – trying to undermine the idea that they were coerced or pressured – and they also try to highlight their own intelligence, education and skills in order to undermine the view that they were somehow brainwashed into carrying out the attack: “Allah has not created us stupid, he has given us intellect in order to use it.”

These themes occur again and again in other video testimonies – including those compiled by British suicide bombers. It is worth quoting the video of Mohammad Sidique Khan, the leader of the July 7 suicide bombers in detail here:

I'm going to keep this short and to the point because it's all been said before by far more eloquent people than me. And our words have no impact upon you, therefore I'm going to talk to you in a language that you understand. Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood.

I'm sure by now the media's painted a suitable picture of me, this predictable propaganda machine will naturally try to put a spin on things to suit the government and to scare the masses into conforming to their power and wealth-obsessed agendas. I and thousands like me are forsaking everything for what we believe. Our driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer. Our

religion is Islam - obedience to the one true God, Allah, and following the footsteps of the final prophet and messenger Muhammad... This is how our ethical stances are dictated.

Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters.

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. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation.

Videos made of and by suicide terrorists provide some remarkable insight into these actors. Like the video testimonies, these are clearly intended to give a particular picture of the perpetrators and their cause. Certain issues and motivations will be focused on and emphasised while others will be glossed over or else ignored entirely. Nevertheless, while recognising their subjective nature, these videos provide an unusual but useful insight into the psychology of the perpetrators and the groups they belong to.

For example, in one film seen by the author describing a series of suicide bombings in Iraq, all of the bombers separately call on the viewer to join their cause and carry out jihadi attacks. These calls are followed by footage showing the bombers' successful attacks. The calls follow a very similar theme which is well illustrated in the quote below, taken from a speech one suicide bomber made to the camera just before he drove off on mission:

We call our brothers – by the will of Allah – to join us and to not delay in doing so. Everyone who watches this video should know that – by Allah – there is nothing between us and the Firdaws¹ except the pressing of a button. We ask Allah to grant us acceptance, success and correct aim, as well as to grant you the ability to join us.

These personal calls from each of the bombers are then backed up by a narrated call at the end of the video which emphasises the similarities between the viewer and the bombers and again calls on the viewers to follow their example:

¹ Firdaws (فردوس) is the highest level of heaven in Islamic tradition. This is where the prophets, the martyrs and the most truthful and pious people dwell.

[these] are real events that have occurred and are continuing to occur in [Iraq] and the heroes [suicide bombers] featured in this production are people just like us. They had lives just like our lives, homes like our homes. They had sons and daughters, fathers and mothers. Some of them had universities that they were looking forward to graduating from with the highest of degrees, and some of them had businesses that they were preoccupied with expanding. However, they all refused humiliation and disgrace, weakness and degradation. They were pained by the weakness of the Islamic nation and the pouncing of other nations upon it ... They were pained by the situation of the youth of Islam, and what they are in of misguidance and loss; the youth of Islam who used to pulverise the Kings of the East and the Caesars of the West; today find themselves lost between the pop stars of the East and the immorality of the West. So they decided to make Hijrah² for the sake of Allah and in order to give victory to this Upright Religion.

Despite the indiscriminate and extreme violence of many terrorist attacks, the vast majority of research on terrorists has concluded that they are not mentally or psychology abnormal (Horgan, 2005). On the contrary, many studies have found that terrorists are actually psychologically much healthier and far more stable than other violent criminals. For example, Wilfred Rasch's (1979) work on German terrorists produced some very important early insights. Working as a psychiatrist, Rasch examined a number of terrorists who had been captured by the West German authorities. Included in this sample were a number of infamous individuals such as Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof who were the leaders of the Red Army Faction.

Despite the fact that another psychologist had previously claimed that Baader was a sociopath (Cooper, 1977), Rasch found after detailed and close contact with the captured terrorists that "nothing was found which could justify their classification as psychotics, neurotics, fanatics or psychopaths." Despite the fact that Baader and the others would shortly afterwards commit suicide in prison, Rasch found that he could not even diagnose these individuals as

² The Hijrah refers to the Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Madinah in 622A.D.. The word hijrah means to leave a place to seek sanctuary or freedom from persecution or freedom of religion or any other purpose. Hijrah can also mean to leave a bad way of life for a good or more righteous way.

“paranoid”. Rasch examined a further 40 suspected terrorists and again he could not find any evidence of psychological abnormality.

The differences between Rasch’s findings and those of Cooper are worth looking at closer. Rasch came to his conclusions only after extensive, personal contact with the captured terrorists. Cooper on the other hand never actually met them. Rather he came to his conclusions entirely through second-hand sources such as magazine stories and books. This is a common trend seen in research on terrorists. Those researchers and ‘experts’ who suggest that terrorists are psychologically abnormal tend to be the ones with the least amount of contact with actual terrorists. In stark contrast, those researchers who have had met with terrorists find that suggestions that these people are somehow abnormal simply do not stand up to close scrutiny. Direct research on terrorists from Spain, Northern Ireland, Israel and elsewhere has confirmed this finding: most terrorists simply are not crazy. While there are rare instances of individuals with personality or psychological abnormalities being involved in terrorism, such individuals are the exception rather than the rule. Where they do occur they tend to be figures on the fringe of the movement rather than key members. For the vast majority of terrorists, whatever their reasons for becoming involved in terrorism, it is not because they are psychological deviant or abnormal. Somewhat surprisingly, psychologists have gradually been forced to accept that the most notable characteristic of terrorists is their normality.

This unexpected finding even applies to suicide terrorists, where again most perpetrators appear to have a relatively unremarkable psychology (Silke, 2003). No suicide terrorist personality has been identified. They are a surprisingly varied group of actors and it would be surprising if they all fit comfortably into one profile or category.

Why then do these people become involved in suicide terrorism? At one level, it is important to recognise that they do not describe the act as ‘suicide’ nor do they see it in those terms. Rather it is seen in terms of sacrificing oneself for a serious and justified cause. Psychologically this represents an important difference. Consider for example the following comments from Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradhawi:

Those who oppose martyrdom operations and claim that they are suicide are making a great mistake. The goals of the one who carries out a martyrdom operation and of the

one who commits suicide are completely different ... The suicide kills himself for himself, because he failed in business, love, an examination, or the like. He was too weak to cope with the situation and chose to flee life for death. In contrast, the one who carries out a martyrdom operation does not think of himself. He sacrifices himself for the sake of a higher goal, for which all sacrifices become meaningless. (quoted in Aaron, 2008, p.89).

These comments referring to jihadi martyrs, mirror very closely comments made in relation to Japanese kamikaze from the Second World War. For example, consider the comments of Lt. General Torashira Kawabe made to US interrogators after the war:

We believed that our spiritual convictions and moral strength could balance your material and scientific advantages. We did not consider our attacks to be 'suicide'. The pilot did not start out on his mission with the intention of committing suicide. He looked upon himself as a human bomb which would destroy a certain part of the fleet ... [and] died happy in the conviction that his death was a step towards the final victory. (O'Neill, 1999, pp.130-131).

Thus we should not automatically expect the patterns common with 'ordinary' suicides to be replicated with suicide terrorists. Certainly, the evidence suggests that the terrorists do not seem to follow those patterns.

One key element is recognising that the decision to carry out a suicide attack ('martyrdom operation') has not been made quickly or abruptly. Rather the journey to that stage is best seen as a gradual process. Becoming a terrorist is in the first instance an issue of socialisation. This is certainly the case with jihadi extremism, where individuals tend not to join the jihad as isolated individuals. Rather, it is within small groups that individuals gradually become radicalized. This is a trend identified by both Sageman (2004) and Bakker (2007) who reviewed the life histories of hundreds of jihadi terrorists.

In his analysis of 242 jihadis, Bakker (2007) found that these individuals tended to become involved in terrorism through networks of friends or relatives and that generally there were no formal ties with global Salafi networks. In short, the individuals were not becoming

radicalized because of the efforts of an al-Qaeda recruiter, but rather that the process was occurring in an independent manner.

Within this group context, they gradually adopt the beliefs and faith of their more extreme members (in a psychological process known as risky shift). As both Sageman and Bakker found, their new Salafi faith resulted in them becoming more isolated from their childhood friends and family, and led to an ever increasing dependence on, and loyalty towards the group. With an increasing focus on this small group, their religious faith became more important and more intense. The polarization experienced within the group, combined with an increased sense of group identity and commitment, helped to radicalize individuals and facilitate their entry into the jihad in a way which was approved by their new social peers.

Any given society will possess some minorities and other disaffected groups who rightly or wrongly perceive that the world is treating them harshly. In some cases, there are genuine and very substantial causes for grievance. Individuals who belong to or identify with such disaffected groups share in a sense of injustice and persecution. It is from such pools that individual terrorists emerge. The move from the disaffected to violent extremist is usually facilitated by a catalyst event. Normally, this is an act of extreme physical violence committed by the police or security forces or other rival group against the individual, family, friends, or simply anyone they can identify with. The shooting of a father and his twelve year son by Israeli soldiers in September 2000 at Netzarim acted as such a catalyst event for Palestinians. Captured on television, the shooting of the two as they cowered behind a water barrel contributed to a dramatic resurgence in terrorist violence in the region. The combination of a sense of belonging to a beleaguered group combined with the experience of an act (or acts) of extreme violence against either oneself or significant others, is the impetus for some to engage in terrorism.

It is important to emphasise that one does not need to experience events firsthand to be affected by them. Vicarious exposure through television or the internet can have the same impact. In the past, many IRA members who came from the Irish Republic reported that it was what they had seen on television which motivated them to join the group. They had no relatives or friends living in Northern Ireland – and most had never even been to the province – but media coverage of violence there had played a critical role in convincing them to join.

Similarly, today, most jihadi recruits have never been to Iraq, Afghanistan or Israel. They have no direct connections with those countries. No friends or family living there. However, they do have a sense of connection with the conflict and the media coverage of the conflict – combined with the often very graphic coverage in jihadi videos – acts as an important catalyst in the radicalisation process.

Ultimately, most suicide bombers are volunteers and already possess the intention or willingness to take part in suicide attacks. With rare exceptions, the groups do not coerce them into it. Suicide bombers tend to be volunteers who have chosen the option of a suicide action even when other avenues for violence remained open to them. Indeed, leaders of terrorist groups are often instructed to turn away youths who wish to take part in suicide attacks. As one senior member of Islamic Jihad put it ‘Some of the youths insist they want to lead a suicide operation ... My orders are to persuade them not to go, to test them. If they still insist they are chosen’ (Kushner, 1996, p.332).

Conclusions

The Chinese general Sun Tzu warned thousands of years ago ‘If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.’ History and psychology give us some powerful tools for understanding suicide terrorism. History quickly teaches us that this tactic is not the reserve of any one religion and there are many examples from the past of individuals with very different motivations who are willing to sacrifice their life in an effort to kill others. Thus it is a mistake to see modern suicide terrorism as inherently an ‘Islamic problem’. Similarly, history also teaches us that perspective is important. If you sympathise with the perpetrators cause – such as the attempt to kill Hitler – then we tend to explain the perpetrators’ decisions and motivations in very different (and usually much more positive) ways. If we disagree with the aims, then explanations begin to cluster around issues such as brainwashing, indoctrination, grooming, and radicalisation of vulnerable personalities. The truth almost certainly lies somewhere in between.

The lesson from psychology is that there is no obvious suicide terrorist personality. This seems to match with much of what history is emphasising. Individuals reach the point of

carrying out a suicide attack through a long process, a process which generally has more to do with ordinary social psychology than with the tenets of clinical or abnormal psychology.

Used effectively, these insights can be tremendously helpful in stripping away many of the myths and assumptions which surround debates on suicide terrorism and leave us with a much more realistic assessment of the perpetrators, who they are, how they see themselves and what forces motivate and drive them. As Sun Tzu would have recognised, a more realistic understanding is a vital first step in developing more effective approaches for both countering and preventing the threat.

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