

The Phenomenon of Suicide Bombing

A Review of Psychological and Nonpsychological Factors

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Abstract. This article reviews the literature on the phenomenon of suicide bombing. It addresses the question of just how much a psychological understanding of the individuals involved can aid in prevention. The article looks at historical, epidemiological, and cultural perspectives and compares the nonpsychological and psychological approaches to suicide bombing. On the basis of the material available it seems that social processes such as group-dynamic indoctrination and political factors are decisive in analyzing this problem. Cultural, nationalistic, and religious factors are important. The conclusion is that in suicidal bombing, suicide is instrumental in the context of war, not in the context of psychopathology. Suicide bombing is instrumental in realizing fatalities, and it is only one of many weapons. The act of killing in warfare is more important to understanding suicidal terrorism than the act of suicide. This explains why psychological profiling of suicidal terrorists has to date not been successful.

Keywords: suicide, terror, bombing, indoctrination, psychological and nonpsychological approaches

Authors' Note

This manuscript was prepared for the IASP Taskforce on Suicidal Acts in Terrorism. This manuscript reflects only the views of the authors. The purpose of the Task Force is to offer recommendations to the IASP. Thus, this manuscript does not reflect the standpoint or views of the IASP.

The authors wish to state the following: Suicide bombing is a complex issue with widely different views attached to it. It is, therefore, very difficult to be objective. As are most people, the authors are emotionally touched by this practice. One cannot avoid reacting in a subjective manner. In the following text we do not claim to be totally objective, since we approach the topic from an Israeli and Western European perspective. We accept the likelihood that the following text will not be regarded as objective by all the readers. Yet, we have tried to be as neutral as we possibly could.

Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed an alarming rise in the number and scope of targeted suicide bombing attacks worldwide. Besides their potential to inflict many casualties, suicide bombing attacks are particularly dangerous because they are so difficult to combat. By virtue of their ability to carry out the attack where and when it will cause

the most damage, suicide terrorists are extremely likely to succeed. At the same time, the attacks inspire religious or ideological zeal, which increases the threat to society (Ganor, 2001). As even the least effective attack can strike a deadly blow to public morale, suicide bombing causes not only direct damage to individuals in its path, but also severe psychological damage to the population at large. The fear of terror, which is usually stronger than the threat itself, is largely the result of its unpredictability. Living under terror means being on constant alert. The single attack on September 11, 2001 in the United States suddenly made people aware of how vulnerable they are simply because of their dependency on modern mass transport, electricity, and pure water supplies.

Suicidal behavior is not easily definable, since there appear to be fundamental differences between people who attempt suicide and people who die from suicide. Furthermore, the true intentions behind the act and the degree of consciousness preceding it often remain unclear (Merari, 1998). Another difficulty is the distinction among those who are ready to die, those who seek to die, and those who are indoctrinated into suicide.

For the purpose of this paper, a suicide bombing attack is defined as a politically motivated, violent attack perpetrated by a self-aware individual who actively and purposefully causes his own death by blowing himself up along with his chosen target. The perpetrator's death is a precondition for the success of the mission (Schweitzer, 2001).

Whether mental-health professionals should take an interest in suicide bombing is a moot point. Is there a psychological profile that characterizes suicide terrorist? Can we understand the mind of a suicide terrorist? Such questions are, of course, of vital interest to counterintelligence agencies. Yet society, too, is facing the possibility of new and greater mass-destructive attacks. Should we not also seek to decipher the states of mind that are conducive to such actions and the psychology underlying personal decisions to cause horrible suffering and grief to an untold number of people?.

This paper attempts to tackle some of these issues and to review the various theories suggested to explain the phenomenon of suicide bombing.

History

While terrorism is not a new phenomenon and has always carried a high risk for its perpetrators, what is new is the desire of certain individuals to kill others while killing themselves (Merari, 2004). Although some authors claim that before the early 1980s suicide bombing was rare but not unknown (Lewis, 1968; O'Neill, 1981; Rapoport, 1984), a more thorough examination of these reports shows that the early cases cited were not true suicide bombing events because they did not include the element of self-killing.

Amnon Lipkin-Shahak (2001), former Chief-of-Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, speculated that the first person to take the lives of many others while committing suicide was Samson. However, though he performed his act out of rage, revenge, and desperation, Samson was not a terrorist. Accordingly, the Jewish Sicarii in the 1st century AD and the Persian Assassins (Hashishiyun) in the 11th–13th centuries AD, who killed their opponents by dagger and were highly likely to be caught in the process and executed themselves, did not kill themselves deliberately. In this respect, they were not different from the 19th century anarchists, the early 20th century Russian social revolutionaries, and the late 20th century Latin American terrorists (Merari, 2004). The early terrorist attacks in Israel in the 1970s were actually intended for purposes of hostage taking, and incidentally turned into suicide. They differ from modern suicide bombing in that they did not originate from an organizational decision to kill by suicide. By contrast, the Japanese Kamikazi pilots of World War II were indeed suicidal, but their actions were performed in the context of a military operation. Conceivably, the psychological processes inherent in forming a military suicide unit differ from those involved in producing an individual suicide terrorist, though there may be overlap with the recruitment methods used by insurgent organizations that operate in a military or guerilla warfare context. So far, the only insurgent group to employ suicide bombing attacks to undermine enemy soldiers are the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in Sri Lanka.

The LTTE adopted the tactics it used to kill the heads of state of Sri Lanka and India from the Hezbollah in Lebanon, the first nonreligious group to engage in what we define as modern suicide bombing. These attacks were successful in removing foreign UN peacekeeping forces from Lebanon and, later, in destroying a Jewish Center in Buenos Aires. They were largely based on the religiously inspired suicide bombing of the Sunni fundamentalists supported by Iran. Other secular groups that used these tactics were the Tanzim (armed wing of the Fatah), al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya in Egypt, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), the Baath party, and the Lebanese communist party (Merari, 2004; Schweitzer, 2001). The most notorious acts have been carried out by al-Qaeda, headed by Osama bin Laden, which has close operational links with Egyptian groups. Chechen rebels, as well, have carried out at least 16 suicide attacks against Russia in the past few years

Evidence suggests that the Chechen implementation of suicide attacks as a main mode of operation was prompted by the success of al-Qaeda (Paz, 2001). In Iraq, large-scale suicide attacks have been instituted recently in response to the U.S. occupation. In the countries where suicide attacks were used by terrorist groups, they caused far more casualties than any other mode of terrorist operation.

Epidemiology

The most striking epidemiological feature of suicide bombing is its almost epidemic-like increase over the last two decades, and especially, the last 5 years. Today, terrorist organizations rely increasingly on suicide attacks to achieve major political objectives, and the attacks are growing in both tempo and location (Pape, 2003). It is extremely difficult to profile suicide terrorists because they come from a wide range of backgrounds. In a study of Palestinian terrorists Merari (2004) found no differences in the distribution of socioeconomic or educational factors from the general Palestinian population. Others have noted some similarities with nonterrorist suicide victims, namely predominantly male sex (although this is changing) and unmarried status. Religious groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) generally reject candidates who are married, under 18 years of age, sole wage earners in the family, or burdened with other family responsibilities. Interestingly, however, religion is a risk factor, *not* a protective factor (see Kershner, 2001).

According to Hassan (2001), the typical Palestinian suicide terrorist is religious, "normal, polite, and serious." They are motivated mainly by the effectiveness of suicide bombing as a military strategy, nationalistic pride, need to revenge national and personal humiliation, and hatred of Israel and America.

Joseph Lelyveld (2001), the *New York Times* journalist, claimed that suicide bombers have no underlying psycho-

pathology, and that it is, in fact, their mental stability that helps them to endure pressure. He underscored the LTTE's routine exclusion of unstable persons as candidates for suicidal terrorism, in addition to the ability of the 9/11 attackers to remain patient and focused for so many months before taking action; observers described the latter as being quiet, aloof, and laconic – far removed from the preconception of an impulsive violent terrorist (Meloy et al., 2001; Restack, 2001). Further support of this notion was provided by Moghadam (2003) who reported that Hamas and PIJ recruiters will not select candidates they deem to have suicidal tendencies. One PIJ member is quoted saying, "In order to be a Martyr bomber, you have to want to live."

Merari (2004) interviewed 34 parents and siblings of suicide bombers from 1993 to 1998 and found no clear evidence of psychopathology and no common personality type. Yet, about one-third of the terrorists had suicidal tendencies, although they did not display the main recognized risk factors for suicide, namely, clinical depression, alcoholism, or drug abuse, or history of suicide attempts.

Having said that, it should be noted that no clear evidence of psychopathology does not mean that suicide terrorists are "sane" or without major psychological disturbance that might be detected if there were an opportunity to evaluate them.

Though traditionally considered a male dominion, more and more female terrorists are joining the fray. Some past examples are Turkey (PKK), Sri Lanka (LTTE), and Lebanon (SSNP). Beyler (2003) reported that women are more likely to become suicide terrorists for nationalistic rather than religious motives. Some religious groups, such as Hamas and PIJ, use women too, but they also have nationalist goals. Cultural influences apparently play a major role in this phenomenon. Thus, it is not solely a woman's willingness to commit a suicide attack, but the recruitment policy of the particular group she seeks to join. Women so far have accounted for 30–40% of the suicide attacks of the LTTE, 11 of the 15 suicide bombings of the PKK, and 5 of 12 suicide attacks of the SSNP. The women are chosen to deceive security officials by their innocent appearance (they are often dressed to look pregnant) and for the stronger psychological impact of their actions (Schweitzer, 2001). Laqueur (1987) claimed that female terrorists are also more loyal and fanatical than their male counterparts, but he does not qualify this impression with empirical evidence.

The role of women in the PKK has been extensively described by Ergil (2001). The Kurdish rural community is very traditional and affords few freedoms to women. Women have little contact with the outside world, and their place in the family depends entirely on men. Most have no schooling. Thus, for women, the PKK means both ethnic and gender emancipation. They are given equal status with men and undergo military training. Since they are less effective than men in regular military operations for physical reasons, suicide missions give them an opportunity to prove their equality.

Similarly, Beyler (2003) described the female Birds of

Freedom suicide commandos, part of the Sri Lankan LTTE, currently an estimated 5000–9000 strong. These women are regarded as equal to men, and their training is extremely rigorous. Some were recruited as children; even 10-year-olds have carried out suicide missions. Many of the women are rape victims and view the suicide mission as a means of restoring their self- and public esteem. This tendency is now spreading to other essentially patriarchal societies, such as the Palestinians in Israel (Beyler, 2003), where women are "literally and metaphorically dying to become more involved in the armed conflict." It has caught both the Israel Defense Forces and Palestinian society largely by surprise. Palestinian clerics have been forced to issue retrospective religious rulings (*Fatwas*) to justify these actions.

The Media

The media play a vital role in the propagation of terror-related suicide. Studies have shown that sensational media reporting induces "copycat" suicidal behaviors; this has been termed the Werther effect. It is particularly relevant to suicide bombing, where the attempt to inflict as many casualties as possible arouses tremendous media coverage. The primary target has switched from physical damage to media interest and recruitment of "volunteers" (Schweitzer, 2001). For example, one young Palestinian interviewed by an A.P. reporter after a suicide attack in Israel exclaimed, "Did you see how the Jews were crying on television? I want to become a Martyr like that to scare the Jews, to send them to hell." This practice was confirmed when the stone throwers in the first Palestinian *Intifada* – who did not generate much media interest – were replaced by suicide bombers in the second *Intifada*. Bassiouni (1983) showed that repeated suicide bombing attacks generate more and more media reports, keeping the public's attention focused on the terrorist organizations' goals and ideology. This cycle creates, in the words of Hoffman (1998), an "inherently symbiotic relationship" between terrorism and the media – a relationship that has been further strengthened by recent innovations in media technology enabling simultaneous reporting from many different sites, combined with the increased use of women suicide bombers to heighten the dramatic effect. Accordingly, when a 29-year-old female lawyer blew herself up in a crowded Haifa restaurant, killing 20 people, Arabs and Jews, many of them children, she became an instant media star. Details of her biography were published for weeks in the newspapers, and her family was interviewed constantly on television, saying how proud they were for what she had done.

Other instances of propagation of terror-related suicide come from the UK (The London Bombings in 2005) and The Netherlands (the assassination of Theo van Gogh, with the intention of being killed after the act) where radical terrorist groups adopted suicidal strategies after having re-

ceived information through news agencies such as Al Jazeera and through the internet. It appears that groups of young muslims from second generation immigrants “self-ignited” without having had contact with Al Qaeda. These “self-burners” expose themselves to indoctrination through web-sites and news agencies and operate without any training.

Means of Suicide Bombing

Crenshaw (1990) suggested that technological improvements in explosive devices alongside the growing ease of access to technological information on the Internet are major factors in the increased use of suicide bombing in terror attacks. With the exception of the malleable plastic explosives and detonator, jackets are easy to make from components bought at the local tailor (stretch denim) and auto shop (steel ball bearings, wires, batteries, and switches), and the resulting bomb is equally easy to operate. The cost of the whole package is about \$150. As a Palestinian security official pointed out in one interview, “. . . the most expensive item is the transportation to the Israeli town” (Hassan, 2001).

Cultural and Religious Factors

Culture and religion often set the conditions under which persons may commit suicide and, sometimes, what means they can employ. They also influence peoples’ concepts and expectations of life after death. Durkheim (1898/1951) suggested that the wide differences in suicide rates across countries are probably explained at least in part by cultural and religious differences. He identified four types of suicide characterized by the integration of an individual to the society. The most germane is the altruistic suicide which Durkheim defined as “where the ego is not its own property, where it is blended with something not itself, where the goal of conduct is exterior to itself, that is, in one of the groups in which it participates” and continues by saying “the individual . . . seeks to strip himself of his personal being in order to be engulfed in something which he regards as his true essence” (see Leenaars, 2004). That is, the individual commits suicide for something he loves more than himself, his needs are not that important. Society in return would support the act, in fact it will benefit from it, not necessarily materially, but in the sense of reinforcing a value of its cultural beliefs (Stack, 2004). Being absorbed into something more valuable than one’s own life and the public support for such an act are presented in the following section.

Although both Judaism and Christianity promise life after death, both condemn suicide as a means of achieving it. Judaism permits a person to kill him/herself only when do-

ing so will prevent that person from committing a murder, performing incest, or worshipping a false god. The preservation of life (*pikuah nefesh*) supersedes all other religious and social dicta. Persons who commit suicide for other than the permitted reasons are maligned; they may be buried only outside the cemetery walls. Modern Christianity is less clear about suicide, though in general the Church considers suicide a rejection of the gift of life and will not bury victims in hallowed ground.

In fact, when Battin (2004) raises the question of why the West doesn’t adopt the tactic of suicide bombing in response to the Jihad actions, (why is it more problematic, more wrong than the other ugly actions of war) she believes that it is the Judaeo-Christianity cultural tradition disparaging suicide that makes it unthinkable to the West to use it as a method of attaining goals. It draws a line between suicide and martyrdom in a way that precludes suicide bombing. It is not that the West does not have this weapon; rather it cannot use it because of its cultural foundations. The concept of martyrdom simply doesn’t exist.

Nonetheless, it should be clear that Islam strictly forbids suicide. Studies of Muslim countries report even lower rates of suicide than for Israeli Jews, except for a substantial increase recently among Israeli Arabs. The Shi’ite survival code (*Taqiyya*) adheres strongly to the preservation of life, even allowing followers to pose as Sunni to save themselves (Merari, 1998). Along with the low suicide rate in Arabic Islamic countries, Abdel-Khalek (2004) cites research indicating higher means than Western samples on measures of psychological disorder, such as depression, which usually serve as predictors of suicide. Abdel-Khalek (2004) solves this supposedly contradiction by emphasizing the functioning of religion as a buffer, an explanation that was confirmed in other studies as well. He writes that a true Muslim believes that he is the servant of Allah, the creator and the provider who determines the life span of his creatures; a Muslim is not free to end his life when ever he wants, and by killing oneself or another is doomed to great punishment. Moreover, Islam considers the killer of one single person as the killer of all people, as if he killed all mankind. Abdel-Khalek (2004) seem to represent an almost unheard voice in Western literature by praising the beauty of the Islam and its supreme values, which he summarizes as friendship, mercy, cooperation, altruism, sacrifice, and self-denial, and the relationship with non-Muslim as those of knowing one another, cooperation, righteousness, kindness, and justice. In that spirit, the word Islam is taken from the word Salaam, “peace” in Arabic. He realizes there may be a gap between the high principles of the Islam and their application and justifiably mentions the difficulty of controlling the behavior of a billion and a quarter believers in Islam. He continues by saying that a superficial and biased reading of the Holy Koran may lead to a premature conclusion that this is a religion that encourages violence but than argues that there is neither war nor hatred between a true Muslim and any Christian or Jew, person or state with the exception of the Zionist in Israel. This statement raises

questions if one considers the acts of suicide bombings against Jews in Argentina or Kenya or the 9/11 attack on American soil designated against American citizens wherever they are. How, then, does he explain suicide bombing? Abdel-Khalek (2004) claims that Islam is not a religion of submission or of oppressed human beings and the Palestinians, as a case study, have a deep feeling of injustice and humiliation after being chased out of their own country and conquered by the Israelis, feelings that may very well be true. Yet provocative, unsubstantiated statements such as "All of these are caused by what the Israeli army has done against the Palestinians by killing and imprisoning, then burying prisoners of war alive, using the arrested people as human spare parts in Israeli hospitals for the wounded Israelis . . ." makes the possibility of conducting an objective discussion far more difficult. Portraying a picture where the Palestinians are the sole victims and Israel is the only one to blame for the conflict seems partial to say the least.

What about he who carries the martyrdom? The concept of the *shahid* or Martyr is, by Islamic definition, a warrior killed by the enemy in battle in the name of Allah. This entitles him to life after death in paradise with 70 of his dearest relatives and friends and the pleasure of 72 virgins (Hassan, 2001). Recent religious and political authorities, however, have adopted the use of the term *shahid* for suicide bombers to overcome the Islamic stricture against suicide and to encourage new recruits (Merari, 1998). Kershner (2001) cites the work of Dr. al-Saraj, a Gazan psychiatrist who reported that the belief in a sinless afterlife is cultivated in potential suicide bombers and it serves as a prominent factor in their willing recruitment. "If these people believed that death was their real end," he claims, "they would never do it." In addition, some religious authorities have been heard voicing militant stands. The Mufti of Jerusalem, Ikrama Sabri, has claimed that "the Muslim embraces death . . . the Muslim is happy to die." These statements are very popular in Gaza and the West Bank, and are connected to the teaching that Western peoples, including Jewish Israelis, are morally corrupt and "protect their lives like a miser protects his money." This manner of thinking may prompt "wannabe" Shahids to prove that, unlike the cowardly infidel, they are not afraid to lose their life (Moghadam, 2003).

Moreover, Islamists in general perceive the West, and in particular the United States and Israel, to be at the forefront of an anti-Islamic conspiracy that tries to undermine their religion, culture, and values. This perceived threat has led many to declare *jihad*, or holy war, in self-defense against the "enemies of God," thereby legitimizing suicide bombings and other violent acts. In the words of the former spiritual leader of Hezbollah, Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, those who commit such activities "are not preachers of violence . . . Jihad in Islam is a defensive movement against those who impose violence" (Moghadam, 2003).

Not all modern suicide bombing is limited to Islamic fundamentalist groups, although they receive the most attention in the Western media. For the last 20 years, the

world leader in suicide bombing attacks (more than 170 attacks) has been the LTTE, who recruit from the predominantly Hindu Tamil population in northern and eastern Sri Lanka and whose ideology has many Marxist-Leninist elements (Gunaratna, 2000; Schweiter, 2001). They have only recently been exceeded by the Palestinians (Merari, 2004) but the number of attacks on Iraqi soil since the American occupation seems to exceed even that.

Community support is also a crucial factor in suicide bombing, which is illustrated by the fact that Muslim culture does not use the Western term "suicide bombing" but rather *Istishad*-Martyrdom, or self-sacrifice in the name of God (Paz, 2001). Palestinian society places great weight on respect and dignity, and considers martyrdom the ultimate honor (Moghadam, 2003). The acceptance of suicide bombers as Martyrs is further encouraged by broadcasting videos of past and future volunteers, distributing their photos in leaflets, posters, and calendars, and reenacting famous acts in pageants and school plays. The suicide terrorist, thus, becomes a source of envy and pride for his (or her) family (Hassan, 2001). Polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, directed by Khalil Shiqaqi, show that the level of social support of suicide bombers in the current *Intifada* fluctuated between 55% and 75%.

The new social status of the suicide bomber was clearly depicted by Dr. al-Sarraj, a Palestinian psychiatrist (see Butler, 2002): "In the last uprising, children used to play a cowboys-and-Indians-type game called 'Intifada.' Some of the kids took the role of Israeli soldiers armed with 'guns' (really sticks) and the others the role of the Arabs wearing *kufiyyahs* and armed with stones. Many of the children preferred to play the soldiers, because they represented power. Today, this game has entirely disappeared. Today, the symbol of power is the Martyr. If you ask a child in Gaza today what he wants to be when he grows up, he doesn't say he wants to be a doctor or a soldier or an engineer. He wants to be a Martyr."

Orbach (2004) observed that in the past the Palestinians were perceived by the Israelis and by themselves as helpless, inefficient, and passive but the image now has changed and Palestinians are now perceived as courageous and heroic. The new self-image of the young Shahid is of a powerful, committed hero who succeeded in shaking the confidence and security of the Israelis. Moreover, Orbach (2004) thinks that the self-image metamorphosis is not just a personal change but it carries with it a glorification of the entire Palestinian people. He quotes a newspaper editor saying after a suicide bombing "This is the mighty Palestinian nation, a nation that does not fear death, a nation that does not know how to surrender."

The Nonpsychological Approach

One of the most articulate protagonists of the nonpsychological approach is Martha Crenshaw of Wesleyan Univer-

sity in the United States. She believes that although the tactic of suicide bombing may be innovative, it is in actuality a combination of familiar methods, targets, and motives and should not be regarded as a *sui generis* phenomenon (Crenshaw, 2000). The motives for suicide bombing do not appear to differ significantly from the motives for terrorism in general – revenge, retaliation, and the provocation of government overreaction. Indeed, she found that the outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normality. In her thoughtful review, “The logic of terrorism,” Crenshaw (1990) showed that terrorist action is the product of strategy, not a consequence of psychological or sociological factors. Terrorist organizations wish to effect political change as quickly as possible in the face of a strategic inferiority. Her contention is supported by findings that the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States caused nearly 10 times more fatalities than any previous terrorist attack in history. Furthermore, in Israel, suicide attacks in the course of the Palestinian *Intifada* constituted less than 1% of the total number of terrorist attacks, but caused 51% of all Israeli fatalities (Israel Defense Forces, 2003). According to Crenshaw (2000), during the past 20 years, suicide bombing has been steadily rising because terrorists have learned that it is effective. Suicide terrorists sought to compel American and French military forces to abandon Lebanon in 1983, Israeli forces to leave Lebanon in 1985, Israeli forces to quit the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1994 and 1995, the Sri Lankan government to create an independent Tamil state starting in 1990, and the Turkish government to grant autonomy to the Kurds in the late 1990s. In none of these cases did the terrorist groups achieve their full objective. Nevertheless, in all of them, except in Turkey, the particular terrorist group could boast greater political gains than those made before it resorted to suicide operations. That is, suicide bombing made target nations somewhat more likely to surrender modest goals (Pape, 2003). While it is too early to assess at this fluid stage the impact of the Iraqi attacks on the future of Iraq in particular and on the American war on terrorism and the U.S. political-strategic situation in general, it seems likely that it will be considerable (Merari, 2004).

Pape (2003) described a number of properties that are consistent with suicide bombing as a specific, directed, rational strategy:

- 1) *Timing*. Nearly all suicide attacks occur in organized, coherent campaigns, not as isolated or randomly timed incidents. Accordingly, Merari (2000) reported that he did not know “. . . of a single case in which an individual decided on his own to carry out a suicide attack. In all cases it was an organization that picked the people for the mission, trained them, decided on the target, chose a time, arranged logistics and sent them.” Thus, suicidal terrorist attacks are not done on the spur of the moment, as often occurs in suicide.
- 2) *Nationalist goals*. Suicide terrorism is aimed at gaining control of what the terrorists believe is their national homeland territory; that is, at an existential threat, an

extreme circumstance, which warrants extreme means (Merari, 2004). This was true for Hamas in 1993, who believed the Israeli-Palestinian peace process directly threatened both its ideology and its independent organizational existence. It was also true for the LTTE in 1987, when the Sri Lankan army was forcing their retreat (Gunnaratna, 2000), and for the Kurdish PKK in 1999, when the group was suffering a severe deterioration in morale following heavy blows from the Turkish army and the capture of its leader, Abdullah Ocalan (Ergil, 2001; Schweitzer, 2001).

By contrast, many attacks by other groups, notably al-Qaeda and its satellites in Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey, do not fit the pattern of a desperate situation. Al-Qaeda was not under a devastating American offensive when it decided to carry out the suicide attacks in 1998, 2000, and 2001; nor did al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Turkey and Indonesia face a direct local threat in the aftermath of 9/11, despite America’s war on terrorism. Nevertheless, while the use of suicide bombing may be at least in part a reflection of its new “fashionability” and its current status as the trademark of militant Islamism, Merari (2004) believes these reasons are insufficient to sustain massive, long-term campaigns of suicide bombing, such as those conducted by the Palestinians or Chechens, for whom cultural background and ideology are probably less important than perceived necessity.

Be that as it may, it is the individual’s willingness to die that makes suicide bombing seem irrational. Despite the practical considerations of evading defenses and gaining access to desirable targets, doesn’t the individual terrorist’s willingness to experience certain death require a psycho-cultural explanation? In response to this issue, Crenshaw (1990) emphasizes the crucial role of martyrdom in suicide bombing. Were martyrdom not highly valued by the society or at least by the subculture, individuals would not seek it. Martyrdom represents the legitimacy and authenticity of the cause, and the willingness of the individual to sacrifice everything for the cause establishes its ultimate truth. For example, in one of the most effective terrorist organizations, the LTTE, the devotion of the members to the group is fierce, and all carry a capsule of cyanide to be consumed at capture to prevent their betraying their comrades (Schweitzer, 2001).

Psychological Approach

Perhaps the greatest research effort by psychoanalytically oriented theorists in this field was performed by the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (GAP) in 1978. Although this study was done long before the outbreak of modern suicide bombing and is, thus, somewhat beyond the scope of the present report, it is the most systematic review of the psychoanalytic approach to terror and, there-

fore, worth summarizing here. The study was based on a series of systematic interviews of Palestinian Arabs living in refugee camps in Gaza and Jordan, in Cairo and Jerusalem, and in Arab villages in Israel. The researchers hypothesized that a 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 the self and its extensions. Furthermore, the potential for violence is inherent in the reaction of the self to injury or to a threat to cohesion and continuity, whether addressed directly to the core (self) or its extensions. Most of the findings were explained according to the narcissistic-self psychological theory of Kohut (GAP, 1978).

Kohut (GAP, 1978) claimed that narcissistic rage arises when the self-object fails to live up to absolutist expectations. Although this occurs 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. In these people, the maintenance of self-esteem and of coherence of the self depends on the unconditional availability of the approving mirroring function of an admiring self-object or on the ever-present opportunity for a merger with an idealized one. This injury of self-regard is also a principal source of group aggression. At the group or national level, the rage is directed against the enemy who is seen as violating the self, the extensions of the self, and the extended self – including one's land, village, customs, etc. However, the enemy who elicits the archaic rage is seldom understood by those who are narcissistically vulnerable. There is a suspension of empathy and rational analysis so that the enemy becomes "not an autonomous source of impulses but a flow in a narcissistically perceived reality."

Rochlin (GAP, 1978) argued that aggression is part of the defense of self. Therefore, instead of asking what makes man aggressive and hateful, he asked what makes man prone to humiliation and vulnerable to injury. He suggested that narcissistic humiliation plus the license that goes with group sanction creates a dangerous mix.

Fromm (GAP, 1978) pointed out that this "group narcissism" involves unforgiving injury. When one's country is slighted, the narcissistic rage is labeled patriotism or loyalty, and the individual's motives are, therefore, never questioned.

It is noteworthy that by the year 1960 a large majority of the Palestine Arab population had established a distinctive Palestinian identity and had entered a phase of nationalistic peoplehood, with the definitive goal of returning to their homes in Palestine. The Palestinians interviewed by the GAP group asserted this uniquely Palestinian identity positively and vigorously. The most powerful element heard was their narcissistic rage for the Palestinian people, like that for the self, which arose from a sense of injury and shame and, in accordance with the narcissistic theory of Kohut (GAP, 1978), "the need for revenge, for righting a wrong, for undoing a hurt by whatever means, and a deeply

anchored, unrelenting compulsion in the pursuit of all these aims." These emotions were voiced by both poor and materially wealthy Palestinians. The subjects also shared another characteristic of narcissistic injury noted by Kohut (GAP, 1978): an intact and even sharpened "... reasoning capacity while totally under the domination and in the service of the overriding emotion."

Post (1998) leans on Kohut's terms as well when he argues that political terrorists are driven to commit acts of political violence as a consequence of psychological forces and that such individuals are drawn to the path of terrorism in order to commit acts of violence. He supported his contention with several studies, although he admitted that all were limited by poor methodology. Specifically, West German and Italian social scientists found that members of the Red Army Faction and the Red Brigade had a high incidence of fragmented families, loss of a parent at an early age, severe conflict with parents, and hostile fathers. Many had unsuccessful personal, educational, or vocational lives leading to feelings of inadequacy. Psychoanalytically oriented interviews revealed "developmental histories characterized by narcissistic wounds and a predominant reliance on the psychological mechanisms of splitting and externalization." Combined, these factors caused them to seek out attractive groups of like-minded individuals with an "It's not us, it's them" credo. Similar findings were reported for Basque and Armenian terrorists as well.

Pearlstein (1991) noted evidence of narcissistic injury in many first-generation and some-second generation terrorists, namely, massive and lasting damage to self-image and self-esteem severe enough to force the discredited self to seek a new, positive identity. These people "represented the kind of human raw material a recruiter for some terrorist organization would find it easy prey upon . . . All had a lack of other satisfying career options. All had no compunctions against the use of violence." However, he claimed that these psychological factors do not apply to today's suicide bombers, who appear to be motivated overwhelmingly by religious beliefs, or at least, by their interpretation of religious faith. "Indeed, their audience seems to be Allah, not the office workers in New York, Kenya or, Tanzania, where their bombs have detonated."

By contrast, Moghadam (2003) argued that if religious fervor alone could explain the phenomenon of suicide bombing, then acts of suicide bombing would be expected to occur more frequently in countries where deep religious beliefs, let alone religious fundamentalism, is a powerful force.

Stein (2003) sought to explain a letter left behind by Mohammed Atta, leader of the 9/11 suicide bombing group, in psychoanalytic terms. Despite the obvious limitations of such an approach, we thought it interesting to consider a more radical psychoanalytic view of suicide bombing, although the author focused on the willingness to kill others, not the self. Her hypothesis was based on Freud's statement: "It seems to me a most surprising discovery that the problems of social psychology, too, should

prove soluble on the basis of one single concrete point – man’s relation to his father.” (Freud, 1913). Specifically, Stein claimed that the letter was intended to serve as a means of fortifying the minds of terrorists who are about to commit an act of mass destruction. Its tone resembles, according to Stein, the voice of a wise father instructing his sons in the correct manner to approach a mission of great importance. Although we would expect such a document to contain exhortations of hate, cries to destroy and annihilate, instead it reassures, calms, calls for restraint and thoughtful control, and appeals for heightened consciousness. It does not speak of hatred. It is past hatred. Absurdly and perversely, it is about love; the love of God. The letter frequently mentions God’s satisfaction with the act to be accomplished and the things the men need to do in order to enter God’s eternal paradise. Although we know that these include annihilation of the “enemies of God” and of the terrorists themselves (the tools of such annihilation), this is not spelled out in the letter. The letter describes a ritual at the end of which the supplicant is to receive God’s approval by doing what pleases God – purifying the world of contaminating infidels. The confident intimacy of a son close to his father, who has attained a long-promised love that is no longer withheld, is almost palpable. If this feeling is sustained inside oneself, it does not have to be demonstrated externally. “You should feel complete tranquility, because the time between you and your marriage . . . is very short.” Inasmuch as nothing further is said about that marriage, and particularly whom one will marry, the idea that the marriage is that of the son(s) to God does not sound absurd at all.

Is there a root affinity between a son’s love for his divine father and the religious devotion and intimate communion with God leading to infliction of mass killing and destruction in His name? Do they spring from the same psychic source? Do they bear on the image of the father, in the words of Benjamin (1995), as the “liberator” who opens the window to the outside world and offers (in Benjamin’s case) his daughter freedom from domesticity and mother’s absolute power? Is there any similarity between the father of freedom and creativity, and the father who loves those who kill his enemies and chooses those killers as his accepted sons? In both instances, the “father” not only empowers and inspires, he also imparts a sense of fulfillment and joy of deliverance from a confining life and the identification with new ideals. Benjamin’s words thus acquire an added resonance.

Lacan (1994) claimed that the process of legitimizing butchery by formulating a God who is feared and loved and who does not say no to dissoluteness and crime (“the imaginary father” in Lacan’s words, 1953–1954) must be complemented by the mental obliteration of all vestiges of humanness from a large segment of human beings. Along the same line, Lifton (1979) suggested that severing the outer world from human meaning may make it possible for terrorists both to focus on the instrumental tasks at hand and to remain immersed in an intensely religious state of mind

that screens out undesirable affects and thoughts. He calls this “a numbing process . . . similar to that cultivated among Japanese soldiers during WWII in serving the Emperor, as well as among the Nazis. The soldier was to steel his mind against all compunctions or feelings of compassion, to achieve . . . a version of the ‘diamond mind’ that contributes both to fanatical fighting and to grotesque acts of atrocity.” In addition to its capacity to enhance functioning, a mesmerized, mechanized mind feeds on hatred and loathing, the building blocks of dismissive contempt. It uses the power of contempt to chill any affiliative, compassionate emotion. However, for religious terrorists, the psychic transition does not stop here. The loathing and contempt are further transformed into a state of enthrallment and deep, total love for the superior divine power.

The intriguing process whereby contempt becomes love and adoration poses a major challenge to psychoanalysts. How can we describe the nature of such love? How does one make the passage from abhorrence of killing to the sanctification of killing as good and noble? What mechanism underlies the subversion that culminates in this radically altered perception of human beings? As Oppenheimer (1996) writes, “The eyes of the evildoers and their followers must be taught to see the ordinary as freakish and [subsequently] to consider the freakish as horrible and as worthy of extermination, as insects and diseases. Any sort of violence . . . becomes intelligible and necessary when dealing with creatures, formerly considered human, who are suddenly shown to be poisonous.”

Clinicians must bear in mind that all these psychoanalytic explanations lack a direct source of information on the mindset and motivation of suicide terrorists. In the absence of empirical evidence, they should be regarded as purely speculative.

Bandura (1998), a prominent social scientist, used a more cognitive- and behavior-oriented approach to describe the mechanisms of moral disengagement from inhumane conduct – the mandatory precursor of the performance of actions the person would formerly have considered reprehensible. These include moral justification, palliative comparison, and euphemistic labeling. Combined, they allow the perpetrator to minimize or ignore the consequences of his act and to displace or diffuse responsibility for it and to ultimately dehumanize and blame the victim. All of them require a degree of self-deception. This raises a crucial question among psychoanalysts, because it is impossible to be both deceiver and deceived simultaneously. So far, efforts to solve this enigma have met with little success. “Given the existence of so many psychological devices for disengagement of moral control, societies cannot rely on individuals, however righteous their standards, to provide safeguards against destructive behaviors” (Bandura, 1998).

Volkan (1997), to aid clinicians in the understanding of the suicide bomber, introduced the concept of placement. He suggested that, for suicide terrorists, personal identity, which has been shattered by helplessness, shame, and hu-

miliation, is replaced by group identity. This notion was supported by Sarraj (see Butler, 2002) in his discussion of the Palestinian uprising. Sarraj argued that the people who are committing suicide bombings in the present (second) *Intifada* are the children of the first *Intifada*. During their growth and development in the time of the first uprising, their self-identity merged with the national identity of humiliation and defeat. Today, they believe they are avenging that defeat at both the personal and national levels. Sarraj contended that the hopelessness and despair that derives from living in a situation that keeps getting worse makes living no different from dying. Desperation is a very powerful force because it is not only negative, it also propels people to actions they would otherwise have found unthinkable. Studies show that during the first *Intifada*, 55% of Palestinian children witnessed their fathers being humiliated or beaten by Israeli soldiers. The psychological impact was stunning. Their authority figure had become someone who could not protect himself, let alone his children. So the children became militant, violent. People are the products of their environment, and children who have seen so much inhumanity will inevitably respond inhumanly. "This," says Sarraj, "is how we can understand the suicide bombings."

In 2002, Volkan proposed the notion of a "regressed" society which posits rigid societal obligations and also permits behavior ordinarily thought to be immoral. Outside groups and their members, thereby, become dehumanized. Accordingly, the author suggested that to understand the mind of the suicide terrorist, we need to understand the psychology of large-group identity. He claimed that intense suicide bomber training (see section on "Indoctrination") has become less necessary of late in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict because terrorist acts have become "endemic" to Palestinian culture. As a result, even relatively brief, less organized training can now produce suicide bombers. Furthermore, because people cling more firmly to their large-group identity in societies under stress, today even "normal" persons can be pushed to become candidates for terrorist acts.

What about the people who stand behind the suicide terrorist campaigns? Berko (2004), in a study of Palestinian terror organizations, found controllers to hold a double moral standard composed of normative moral attitudes to their own families and a blazing hate toward Israelis, Jews, and the West in general. They morally justify their acts by emphasizing their role as victims, their traumatic refugee existence, and their sense of humiliation and deprivation. They rationalize their death sentence to others but not themselves, in what Berko (2004) terms a "distribution of duties." In one interview, a controller pointed out: "That is the way it is . . . that is how it is done . . . here is a soldier and there is a commander." The author believes research should focus more on the population of the controllers "the cannon shooting the missile," for they are the key to understanding the phenomenon of suicide terrorists.

More recently the phenomenon of groups of young mus-

lims in Western Europe who radicalize into terrorist cells has attracted attention. In The Netherlands and in the UK, groups of young, apparently modernized, second-generation immigrants developed into terrorist cells, ready to kill themselves in an organized suicide spree, or to kill public figures or members of parliament who publicly criticize Islam. Substantial information was collected by police investigations after the London bombings and the assassination of Theo van Gogh by a member of the so-called Hofstad group. These young radicals formerly were well educated, adapted to western European lifestyle, and did not show any signs of psychopathology. The pathological aspect here was the speed with which they suddenly changed into fierce combatants hating everything the Western European culture stands for. It appears that these small groups of young persons knew each other from the neighborhood or mosque, isolated themselves from the society, and formed sect-like cells with very strict rules of conduct and authoritarian leadership. Probably the study of group dynamics in the formation of radicalization is more important here. This radicalization may also be conceived as a reaction to the perceived "group tyranny" of the Western world, a reaction to the "crusade against terrorism" (Segal, 2003).

In summary, despite many attempts to psychologically profile suicide bombers, it has not been successful. Some people still see possibilities here (e.g., Lester, 2004), but these possibilities to date are still very speculative. Of course this does not imply that suicide bombers are "sane." It only implies that we cannot predict who will and who will not become a suicide bomber.

Indoctrination

Merari (1998), a major contributor to the analysis of the suicide terrorist, especially in the context of the Middle East, places special importance on the role of indoctrination.

Indoctrination may be long or short term. The main tool in long-term indoctrination is education – by schools, the media, parents, and friends. The purpose of this process is to convince the person of the importance of the cause and of the righteousness of the means necessary for its implementation. Erlich (2002) described the incitement and hatred replete in the Jordanian and Egyptian textbooks that have been used by the Palestinian educational system since 1996, when it was transferred from Israeli authority. These books – geared to elementary school and high school students – are indicative of the current mentality of "war to the death" against Israel and Zionism. One example is listed below (Erlich, 2002):

The Jewish people – The textbooks are fraught with expressions of hatred and hostility against the Jewish people. Quotes from the Koran are used to show that the Jews are corrupt, dishonest, and anti-Islam. They claim that according to the Tal-

mud, Jews believe the human animal was created to serve them, and that they are permitted to deceive the gentiles who have satanic souls.

Indoctrination may also be short-term, focused, and mission-oriented (Merari, 1998). In these cases, it is usually carried out by a charismatic political, military, or religious leader, close to the time of the mission. All Palestinian groups have used short-term indoctrination of *Fedayeen* ("men of sacrifice"). Abu Jihad (also known as Khalil el-Wazir), the revered military commander of Fatah, the largest of the PLO terrorist groups, routinely delivered a farewell speech to all teams of *Fedayeen* just prior to their hostage-taking incursions into Israel. Fundamentalist Shi'ite terrorists are said to have received a blessing from an Imam or an admired sheikh before going on a suicidal car bombing. This kind of indoctrination may serve as an ancillary factor by strengthening already existing convictions and behavioral tendencies with an element of personal commitment to the particular mission. Nevertheless, it will probably not induce suicidal behavior in the absence of other, more important elements.

Several researchers have described the preparatory procedure used by Palestinian suicide terrorists before attack. According to Volkan (2002), the candidate's "teachers" break off his affairs in the "real world" by cutting off meaningful communication and other ties with his friends and family, and by forbidding music and television on the grounds that they may be sexually stimulating. During the last week before the mission, he (or she) will be carefully watched for signs of doubt, and a "trainer" is assigned to guide the potential terrorist through any hesitations. Ganor (2001) noted that some candidates are asked to lie in a graveyard for a few hours to help them overcome fears of dying. A few days before the operation, candidates are filmed holding a gun in one hand and the *Koran* in the other while declaring their calling and encouraging others to follow. They also emphasize the voluntary basis of the mission. Several hours before a planned attack, the terrorist undergoes an intensive spiritual exercise, including prayers and recitations of the *Koran*, religious lectures, and fasting (Hassan, 2001). He pays off all debts and asks for forgiveness for offenses. Just before embarking on the mission, the terrorist performs a ritual ablution, puts on clean clothes, and recites the traditional precombat prayer in which he (or she) asks for Allah's forgiveness and his blessing. Once ready, the terrorist takes on a new identity, and is no longer considered one of the living. He becomes *al-shahid al-hayy*, a warrior awaiting martyrdom.

Merari (2002) views the psychological process of preparation as a "production line," where you enter at one end and come out as a complete suicide bomber at the other. The line is dotted with "crossroads" or social contracts that are, in effect, points of no return, because breaking them will heap shame and dishonor on the person and his family. In this manner, beyond the personal commitment to the cause, the terrorist develops a social commitment to stick

to the mission to the end despite hesitations and second thoughts.

To enforce bonding, Hamas and PIJ often prepare candidates in cells of 3–5 volunteers. They are termed *khaliya istishhadiya*, or martyrdom cells, to differentiate them from ordinary *khaliya askariya*, or military cells. The LTTE also has special suicide units for men (Black Tigers) and women (Birds of Freedom) who are bonded by a social contract to commit a suicidal mission. The power of group commitment was also the basis of the willingness of Japanese pilots to fly kamikaze missions in World War II. Their last letters to their families, written shortly before their final flight, showed that while some were enthusiastic participants, others regarded the suicide mission as a duty they could not evade. Presumably, an element of group commitment was also influential in the September 11 attack in the United States.

Conclusion

The act of suicide is the result of a highly complex interaction between many forces. This is even truer for suicide bombing. Some of the prevention methods propagated by suicidologists are applicable here, the most practical being working with the media to downplay the glorification of terror and to change attitudes to suicide bombing. The latter should also be accomplished by de-glorification in educational programs in the schools, starting from nursery school up, and in the community. Policymakers should prevent the humiliation, oppression, or abuse of sectors of the general population – an especially difficult challenge in countries where wars are being conducted, such as in Israel, and soldiers' lives hang in the balance.

There are very interesting lessons to be learned by social and political scientists, and also by psychoanalysts, from the psychopathologic study of the personality of suicide terrorists. However, we believe the ability of psychology and psychiatry to contribute in a practical manner is very limited. Psychological profiling of suicide bombers has not yet been successful. We agree with the suggestion of Merari (2004) and Berko (2004) that a shift to the study of the processes of propagation, screening, and training of suicide terrorists and selection of individuals for leadership roles in terrorist organizations would yield more useful means for combating suicide bombing. Since suicide bombing is instrumental in warfare, the prevention of suicide bombing will be more effective in the political arena.

Suicide bombing looks like suicide, but in important aspects it is incomparable with suicide. In more aspects it is comparable to killing in a war. Mostly it is part of a political and military strategy. It is a defense against perceived enemies. Religious and nationalist goals are important here. Psychology and psychiatry have little to offer until territorial disputes have been settled.

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