



COVER SHEET

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Suicide Bombers as Weapons of Mass Terror

Geoff Dean, Queensland University of Technology

Christoph Reuter *My Life is a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing* (English-Language translation and abridgment) New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2004 (179 pp). ISBN 0-691-11759-4 (hardback) RRP \$ 44.95.

We feel moral and emotional outrage about someone who deliberately and indiscriminately targets men, women, and children with the sole purpose of killing and maiming as many as possible by turning themselves into a human bomb. For most of us their actions are beyond rational comprehension, and we see suicide bombers as either mad or bad—or both.

Christoph Reuter's research on suicide bombing challenges us to re-think our 'mad/bad' response to the mindset behind a human bomb. He argues that it is too easy to see suicide bombing as just the work of 'crazy fanatics' or individuals who have been 'brainwashed and programmed like some "booby-trapped automatons"' (p. 109). Reuter debunks such myths by providing well documented qualitative data drawn from eight years of interviews with the families and organisations behind Islamic-motivated 'martyrs' in the Middle East.

WMT and the Politics of Power

Suicide bombers are Weapons of Mass Terror. They are a precise, highly effective, and (economically at least) relatively cheap instrument for spreading fear even when they don't kill anyone else but themselves. Reuter highlights this when he recounts the story of twenty-eight year old Muhammad Mahmoud Nassr who walked into a Café in Haifa in northern Israel on 12 August 2001 wearing enough explosives to cause carnage:

Nassr approached a waitress at the café bar, lifted his T-shirt, and asked her if she knew what "that" was. People started screaming and throwing chairs in his direction; everyone rushed outside. ... Nassr, alone in the empty café, cried "Allahu akbar" – God is great – and then blew himself up: his torso was ripped apart, while his head landed on a table. It was a baffling and, fortunately for those in the café at the time, futile attack. Yet what looked like failure concealed an urgent and hidden meaning: look at how easily I could terrify you (p. 4).

The fact is suicide attacks are almost impossible to stop. These attacks expose the authorities as powerless to safeguard the public against such terror-inducing acts of violence by determined individuals.

What makes the task of preventing suicide bombing even more daunting is that these determined individuals don't fit any 'profile'. Unlike criminal profiling where the success rate of profiling a serial killer is relatively good, the consensus emerging from research is that terrorist profiling is a very poor relative. Serial murderers leave their psychological 'signature' or 'calling card' behind at a crime scene because of the excessive psychological baggage and damage they carry around in their heads. Damage is usually due to developmental and/or cognitive dysfunctions they have been subjected to in the past. However, there is no such 'psychological baggage' to profile with a terrorist.

Clearly some individuals who turn to terrorism have experienced significant trauma—we might consider here the Palestinians who are subjected to daily humiliation by the Israeli military. But trauma alone does not make a terrorist. The research evidence is clear that there is no such thing as a typical 'terrorist profile'. Indeed, as Townshend notes, terrorists 'emerge in most good

empirical studies as “disturbingly normal” people’ (2002, p. 16; see also Crenshaw 2003, p. 99). So diverse are terrorist minds that Rubenstein attests:

Thankfully, the search for the ‘terrorist mind’ is now all but abandoned. As Walter Laqueur pointed out twenty-five years ago, the task is quixotic, seeing that among those engaging in political violence there exist so many varieties of terrorist organizations and behavior, sociocultural and political contexts for conflict, and diverse personality types (2003, p. 139).

Williams reinforces this view by pointing out that ‘No comparative work on terrorist psychology has ever succeeded in revealing a particular psychological type or uniform terrorist mind-set’ (2002, p. 160).

Reuter’s research reveals that this conclusion that a ‘terrorist profile’ does not exist applies even more to suicide bombers, especially in the Middle East:

The original assumption – that suicide bombers were exclusively isolated, young, poor, ultra-religious people with no prospects – might have applied in some degree to the first attackers. But nowadays “none of this is right anymore,” admits Ephraim Kam, a retired major of the Israeli military secret service who heads the Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies in Tel Aviv (p. 109).

The emergence of suicide bombing as the terror tactic of choice by Hezbollah (Party of God; a group of Lebanese Shi’ite militants) in the 1980s has long since been successfully exported to equally militant groups, both religious and secular, around the world.

So trying to ‘pick’ the ‘suicide bomber’ in the crowd is a naïve and futile task. Reuter cites the biographies of dozens of suicide bombers that confirm there is no longer any way to draw a narrow profile of today’s would-be attacker (p. 109). He cites psychologist Ariel Merari of Tel Aviv University who argues that the more you look into the biographies, the more the clichés crumble about external factors such as poverty or loneliness playing any major role in determining the profile of a suicide bomber. They come from poor and wealth families, from among the working class and university graduates.

Reuter concludes that the key motivating factor behind Palestinian suicide bombers is not poverty nor even religious fanaticism but rather their sense of powerlessness—‘the thwarting of these expectations’ (p. 10); expectations for their own land, their own state, their independence and freedom. For Reuter a terrorist mind is far from ‘crazy’ or ‘fanatical’. Suicide bombers exhibit ‘a calculated rationality which has concluded that armed struggle is the only way to get back their dignity and independence’ (p. 110).

The Logic of a Terrorist Mind

The logic behind this ‘calculated rationality’ is not one that most people would share. As Reuter points out, Palestinians understand only too well their obvious military inferiority to Israel but they also understand that Israelis, like all humans, want to live and are afraid of death. Suicide bombers have developed a mentality that abandons this natural will to live by embracing death. Hence, the essence of Reuter’s argument is that: ‘When this fearlessness is added to the dynamics of a calculated struggle for power, the old rules of [military] superiority, power, and deterrence simply fall away. Here is the Archimedean point by which we may understand suicide attacks’ (p. 15).

The mechanism Hamas and other militant terrorist groups use to ‘develop’ a mindset that abandons the natural will to live is religion. The religion of the Middle East is Islam. However,

any religious tradition can be used to serve the same purpose, as history shows: ‘Theological thinking that justifies acts of violence occurs on rare occasions in virtually every religious tradition. ... The Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist cultures ... rely on ... precedents and justifications for their own acts of religious violence’ (Juergensmeyer 2000, p. 218).

It is in the lifting of the sanction to kill one’s self that religion, of the fundamentalist kind, makes its potent and deadly contribution. Extreme interpretations of religious texts justify murder by suicide. This is why I think it is misleading to apply terms like ‘religiously-motivated’ terrorism to suicide bombing. It is more accurate to view ‘religion’ as the ‘justification’ of terrorism rather than the ‘motivation’ for it. In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, then, Islamic fundamentalism just serves up a spiritual justification (martyr’s operations) for the bleakly depressing assessment by would-be suicide bombers and their radicalised organisations of the necessity for armed struggle.

It is also wise to avoid confusing the distinctly Palestinian response of Hamas with Al Qaeda. Both use Islamic fundamentalism and suicide bombing to push their agenda but their agendas are not the same. Hamas is involved in the politics of power to establish a Palestinian State, whereas Al Qaeda feeds on the politics of hate with no political purpose other than to wage a jihad on anything remotely ‘Westernised’ including other Arab States like Saudi Arabia, which have in Bin Laden’s view defiled ‘true’ Islam.

However, the justification for suicide bombing does not have to be exclusively or particularly ‘religious’. Other writers on terrorism (Pavlova 2003, p. 31; Schweitzer & Shay 2003, p. 212; Wilkinson 2003, p. 122) make the same point as Reuter that the ‘cause’ can be either ‘secular’ as for the Tamil tigers or ‘religious’ as in radical Islamic fundamentalism or even extreme fundamentalist brands of Christianity like the Christian Identity movement in the United States (Barker 2003, p. 47; Juergensmeyer 2000, p. 218).

Components of a Terrorist Mind

This logic behind suicide bombing has several component parts. When these parts come together either by design or circumstance they have the capacity to form, prime, and activate a terrorist mindset.

The first component is the socio-cultural and geopolitical context that drives psychological functioning and the shaping of individual motivation to sacrifice oneself in the service of a ‘greater cause’, ‘higher call’, or to enter ‘Paradise’ early.

This contextual requirement is a necessary first stage on the path to suicide bombing. The context spawns and maintains a ‘culture of violence’ (Juergensmeyer 2000, p. 60) at boiling point so that community approval for ‘martyr operations’ becomes well entrenched. Reuter cites survey research from the Middle East showing that:

the level of approval for violence rises in line with the level of education. It’s not the mob, nor the illiterate, who are goaded into violence, but precisely the well-educated, well-informed people who conclude that armed struggle is the only way out of the current situation (p. 110).

Once the context has primed the human bomb, the second component in the making of a terrorist mind comes into play—religious fundamentalism. As I’ve already argued, all major religions include advocates who push extreme fundamentalist interpretations of God and the world (see Rapoport 2003, p. 43; Wilkinson 2003, p. 122; Townshend 2002, p. 112; Barker 2003, p. 47; Juergensmeyer 2000, p. 218). These advocates avoid moderate interpretations of Islam,

Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, or Christianity along with democracy, capitalism, and the American way.

What is interesting about Islam is the process used to distort Islamic texts; to use an oft quoted phrase with a different twist, it's a WMD process. I am not talking about the biological/nuclear type of WMD bought into vogue by the Bush Administration mantra of 'Saddam has Weapons of Mass Destruction' and the subsequent Swiss-cheese justification for invading Iraq. The WMD I'm referring to are the Words of Mass Distortion that flow from militant mosques.

Words of Mass Distortion are formed by radicalising the fundamentals of a religion or ideology. Charismatic and zealous leaders peak beguiling words of revenge and Jihad. They ask their followers: God has terror in His mind so why don't you if you claim to be devout and dutiful? They are in the business of selling an idealised political-religious agenda of terror and they are good at it, if the number of volunteer 'martyrs' lining up is evidence.

The third component of logic in the terrorist mind operates at the individual level—beliefs. Religious extremism is nothing new, but what is new is that large sections of the Islamic community believe it. There is little mileage in preaching fundamentalism if nobody listens.

When the component parts of the terrorist mind bent on becoming a suicide bomber line up—a context and culture of violence, religious fundamentalism to justify terrorism through a Words of Mass Distortion process, and individuals with a set of beliefs and expectations that accept without question such religious distortions—then it's a waiting game for the 'martyr' till the right moment for the 'mission' eventuates.

Is a Solution Possible?

Some comfort can be found in Reuter's research, although not all commentators on terrorism would agree with the solution he proposes. Reuter draws hope from what has happened in post-Khomeini Iran. After more than two decades of Iran's 'Islam solution', it is clear that their experiment with a cleric-led dictatorship has failed to deliver anything like salvation for the Iranian people. Poverty, unemployment, and rampant corruption reached new heights in this promised Islamic 'Paradise' on earth. Reuter succinctly states the case:

The moral dictatorship turned inspired believers into a jaded, disgusted, and fed-up populace. The Khomeini era's praise for and popular acceptance of martyrdom was beaten down not by military means – the preferred (and not terribly successful) method of Israel and the United States vis-à-vis their Palestinian and Al-Qaeda jihadist foes – but by the Islamic state's own limitations and contradictions (p. 172).

For suicide bombing to continue unabated on the scale the West is experiencing it has to be 'officially' sanctioned by radicalised Islamic clerics and to win popular support by the masses. Wise, well-informed, and co-operative foreign policy between Western nations, especially the dominant superpower of the United States, and Islamic societies is the only solution worth pursuing. Only by working together with Islamic societies can we secure long-term peace and security on the very small and fragile planet we share. Without solutions that integrate rather than divide, we can expect more volunteer 'martyrs' in defiance of an Israeli style security fence to line up at bus stops and walk into cafes and shopping centres with explosives strapped to their waist.

People may find Reuter's work unsettling because he seeks to understand this terrifying phenomenon rather than pass quick judgment on those who engage in it. His findings, if

not his solution for military restraint and patience, are consistent with what other scholars have found and so demand serious reflection.

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