

Suicide Terrorism – Genesis of

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Suicide Terrorism

The History of Suicide Bombing

The Success of Suicide Terrorism

The Lethal Cocktail of Suicide Terrorism

Sponsoring-Groups Motivations

Ideologies of Suicide Terrorism – Religion and Cosmic Warfare

Individual Motivations

Adopting a Terrorist Ideology as Psychological First Aid

Societal Support for Suicide Terrorism

Abstract

The lethal cocktail leading to suicide terrorism consists of societal support for terrorism, groups organized for terror, an ideology that permits an individual to suicide in order to kill others, coupled with individual motivations that generally respond to the ideology as a type of psychological first aid – albeit short lived.

Glossary

Dissociation - According to the American Psychiatric Association, the essential feature of a dissociative disorder is "a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity or perception of the environment" - American Psychiatric Association (1994) Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (4th ed.). Washington, D.C.: Author. In the case of suicide terrorism, this means an emotional barrier is unconsciously erected walling off the negative emotions generated by choosing to die in this manner and may even include compartmentalizing the event from one's ambitions and daily life. One bomber for example, when planning his attack, suggested that he could not carry a bomb until after his university exams – suggesting that while on the one hand he acknowledged that he was going to his death he was able separate this reality so completely from his mind that he still felt the need to complete his exams prior to going to explode himself.

Jihad - is an Islamic word and makes reference to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed as they are recorded in the Koran and Sunnah, in which believers are taught to struggle on two levels: the first and most important being referred to as the greater jihad in which

an individual strives inwardly in an effort to resist evil and live a pure life according to the tenets of Islam. The lesser jihad involves a political or military struggle to further and/or defend Islam and Islamic lands and people. In the current global context certain ideologies promoting terrorism are referred to by some as promoting militant jihad. For example the US Department of Justice has referred to jihad as the use of violence, including paramilitary action against persons and governments deemed to be enemies of a fundamentalist version of Islam.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – is a person's individualistic response to a traumatic event (see psychological trauma below) in which the following responses occur: an inability to integrate and respond well to a traumatic event on a cognitive, emotional and/or on a sensory level resulting in 1) reexperiencing behaviors including flashbacks, nightmares and unbidden and upsetting thoughts of the event; 2) avoidance of reminders of the event including feelings of social alienation; 3) bodily arousal in response to reminders of the event including shakiness, sweaty palms, loss of concentration, irritability, trouble falling and/or staying asleep; 4) loss of function in life domains including work, intimate and family relationships etc. and 5) all of these symptoms lasting for more than thirty days following the event. Shorter, (less than thirty days following the trauma) but equally disabling and intense, dissociative responses to psychological traumas which at times might transition into PTSD, are labeled as acute stress disorders.

Suicide or Human Bomber – A suicide bomber is anyone who goes so far as to strap on a bomb, drive a vehicle filled with explosives to a target, or who otherwise attempts to detonate an explosive device on an airplane, in a subway, train, car, or elsewhere with the aim of dying to kill - irrespective of whether or not the bomber actually died in the attack or was successful in detonating - as that is often not within the bomber's control. We take the fact of being to the point of willingly strapping on a bomb or other type of improvised explosive device or driving a vehicle loaded with explosives to a target as sufficient evidence of seriousness of the intent to suicide and see the end result, which is often out of the hands of the bomber as less meaningful than the intent implied by these actions. An actor who arrives at a scene with a weapon, most often a gun, in order to shoot as many victims as possible prior to being killed himself may also be seen as a suicide terrorist, but is obviously not a human bomber. Psychologically the preparation and action of going on such a killing spree in which one's death is nearly guaranteed is very similar to that of a human bomber.

Terrorism – has many definitions but is generally viewed as political violence carried out by politically organized non-state actors/groups with the intent to

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destroy property, injure, take hostage and/or kill civilians and thereby intimidate and influence a wider witnessing audience and to effect political, religious or ideological change in both the targeted population and its government's responses; as well as to drum up support among the group's own sympathizers. Terrorism relies heavily upon the mass media to amplify the psychological effect of attacks made on relatively small numbers of victims by relaying horrifying images to a much larger witnessing audience. There is considerable controversy over who is defined as terrorists, particularly in situations where non-state actors (i.e. freedom fighters, rebels or guerilla fighters) could be also seen as leading legitimate rebellions in occupied territories but who nevertheless use similar tactics as terrorists such as using civilians as shields and indiscriminately targeting civilian as well as military targets.

Psychological Trauma – involves an experience in which an individual experiences a serious threat (real or perceived) to his own life or bodily integrity or witnesses death or threat of life or dismemberment in another and responds with overwhelming feelings of fear, horror and helplessness. In this experience the person is typically psychologically overwhelmed and unable to integrate his emotional, cognitive and sensory experiences in a normal manner and a peritraumatic dissociation may result immediately or in some time following the event. Acute or posttraumatic stress disorder may result.

Suicide Terrorism

Suicide terrorism is fast becoming one of the most pestilent global afflictions of the 21st century. As a terror tactic it is one of the most lethal. Strategically it functions as a relatively cheap and effective means of upsetting the political, economic and military situation of a region and has become one of the major threats to peacekeeping and peace-making efforts. Yet as prevalence rates and death tolls from suicidal attacks increase, policy makers are still working in the dark trying to find the most effective policy responses to the emergence of this new and poorly understood security threat. Currently there is an extremely small empirical research database on which policy-makers may base their understanding of the genesis of suicidal terrorism in order to work toward its prevention and eradication. Comprehending this growing threat and learning to combat it effectively

on both the local and international level is extremely relevant to current public policies aimed at promoting peace and stability. This entry briefly discusses the background of modern day suicide terrorism, its migration around the world, and the tendency of modern day terror groups to embrace it as a tactic. Drawing from field research in four distinct world regions I have identified two main differing motivational sets on the level of the individual actors for the genesis of suicide terrorism. The first of these is trauma based, occurs within zones of active conflict and is often: nationalistic; viewed in terms of self and community defense; expressive regarding attempts to mete out justice to the perceived enemy occupier; and includes acts of revenge by actors who are often so traumatized that they have become deeply dissociative and even refer to themselves as "already dead". The second motivational set applies to actors outside of active zones of conflict, who are nevertheless influenced by them (through Internet, video footage, pictures and propaganda), and who frequently develop a deep sense of secondary traumatization. The actors in the second motivational set are generally: vulnerable to terrorists ideologies due to a sense of alienation, marginalization, lack of life meaning and lack of positive identity and usually recruited through exposure via Internet or via close knit family and friendship networks. In both motivational sets it is important to recognize that individuals are generally not motivated to take part in suicide terrorism without an ideology that guides them, and they are also generally in need of an organization to equip and guide them to carry out their acts (although a rare few have acted on their own (Argo, 2004a, 2004b; Speckhard, April 2005), and they generally are more willing to take part in suicide terrorism when there is broad based support for suicide terrorism in the

sector of the community in which they find their sense of belonging.

The History of Suicide Bombing

Dying to kill is not new². What is new is that in modern times since the mid 1980's the tactic of suicide terrorism has been repackaged and reborn. It has suddenly taken off like a wildfire spreading from Lebanon to Palestine, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Morocco, Indonesia, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Iraq (where there is on average one suicide bomber per day), and now sadly even originating in Europe (i.e. the infamous shoe bomber Richard Reid, the Mike's Place bombers in Israel, and Europeans going as bombers to Iraq and Afghanistan) and European bred bombers now even targeting Europe itself. What combination of factors and conditions have made this tactic suddenly so popular that citizens of countries that have no

² I am indebted to Mia Bloom for coining this phrase that she also uses as the title for her book [Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror](#), Columbia University Press, 2005. As far as the history of suicide terrorism, suicide bombing as a strategic tactic is not a new phenomenon. In recent history it appeared in the fifties in Vietnam in the form of bicycle bombers who exploded themselves in cafes killing enemy occupiers who frequented them. (This piece of history related from French counterterrorism expert Francois Gere, personal communication 2005). Looking back into the ancient past, many cite the scriptural account of Sampson as one of the first suicide terrorists who when blinded and chained to pillars decided to use his great strength to pull the columns down, collapsing the building upon himself and those surrounding him. Similarly some experts recall the Muslim Assassins and Jewish Sicari as the first suicide terrorists as both groups carried out assassination missions that were nearly always suicidal for the person carrying it out. Pakistani warriors in ancient times also were known to run underneath elephants carrying advancing troops to slit the bellies of the warring beast bringing them falling down upon themselves – killing both their enemy and themselves in the process.

history of suicide terrorism are suddenly willing to go and even recruit themselves as human bombs making this a main tactic of choice for many terror groups worldwide?

The Success of Suicide Terrorism

Looking back in recent history we see that the current spate of modern day suicide terrorism began in Lebanon in the 1980's when terrorists used suicide truck bombers to attack first the U.S. Embassy and later the barracks of U.S. Marines and French troops, actions which led to the troops deciding to remove themselves from Beirut - positioning themselves offshore – this viewed as a huge strategic victory by the terrorists.

Indeed the current epidemic of suicide terrorism is directly tied to this perception of its success by terror sponsoring groups. As its use migrated around the world even many counter terrorism experts have credited suicide terrorism with: derailing the Oslo peace accords; disrupting the peacekeeping and rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq; impacting the election results in Madrid³; and drawing world attention and concern to political issues that may otherwise have been overlooked. Whether it is effective in achieving any real political gains outside of the community in which it originates – i.e. whether it creates any real power base for those who employ suicide terrorism – is still however debatable.

Terrorist organizations thrive because of failed political solutions between conflicting parties and their continued

³ Some would argue that the Madrid bombings did not involve suicide terrorists as the attackers left their bombs and detonated them from afar; yet upon imminent arrest, the bombers did explode themselves.

existence relies upon their ability to change perceptions and impact the political process in favor of their constituent groups. When a much weaker group is pitted against a larger more powerful, better financed and militarily equipped group, and suicide terrorism becomes the tactic of choice, it can undeniably be seen by the weaker group as strategically both efficient and more likely to lead to desired results than any other method of violence.

Suicide terrorism is a tactic that is:

- Inexpensive. It requires relatively simple, non-costly and easily accessible equipment. The 9-11 attacks of the World Trade Towers and Pentagon cost approximately \$400,000, the Bali bombings about \$20,000 (NATO Defence College, 2004);
- Highly effective. The human bomber is essentially a smart bomb going directly to his target and able to make adjustments even up to the last moments before detonation to avoid detection and to maximize the amount of damage done in the attack.
- Highly lethal. Suicide terrorism operations are the most lethal of nearly all currently utilized terror operations and although they make up only a small fraction of the total of terrorist operations they kill and wound the greatest number of victims.
- Extremely horrifying. The carnage caused by human bombers almost always makes the news hence by targeting only a small group of civilians the terror sponsoring group can count on the media to amplify its effects causing horror

and dread to spread throughout a much wider witnessing audience.

- Nearly impossible to prevent. Once a bomber is equipped and on the way to his target he is virtually impossible to stop (unless he can be talked out of his mission which is rare) as he can always explode himself upon detection (Ganor, 2005).
- Difficult to trace. The bomber if successful, is killed in the attack and unlike in other terror acts needs no resources or risk dedicated to an escape plan, and once killed he cannot be caught and interrogated later revealing who sent him.
- In endless supply if the terror group's constituent population supports the use of this tactic. The main cost of suicide terrorism is the human beings who agree to sacrifice themselves in behalf of the terrorist cause. If this pool of individuals is large the terror organization has a virtually endless supply of weaponry and can carry on a very strong war of attrition with a much more powerful enemy who may eventually make concessions to the terror sponsoring group simply to end the campaign of bombings.

The Lethal Cocktail of Suicide Terrorism

The lethal cocktail out of which suicide terrorism originates is the confluence of four main aspects of suicide terrorism – the sponsoring group's motivations, the ideology which supports it, the individual motivations for enacting it, and the societal support for suicide terrorism. Without this confluence of factors suicide terrorism would cease to exist (Argo,

2003; Hafez, 2004, 2006; Merari, 2003; Moghadam, 2003; Speckhard, 2005a; Speckhard & Ahkmedova, 2005).

When all of these factors are in support of suicide terrorism it becomes a tactic that can travel the world over as a spark igniting and reigniting a massive fire that we can only hope to be able to extinguish before it consumes us in its flames.

Sponsoring Groups Motivations

Organizations provide the means, methods and group dynamic underlying suicide terrorism operations and often the ideology as well. Although terrorist ideologies should not be thought of as simple constructs of terror sponsoring groups. They arise in fact from a complex mix of social and political circumstances, psychological and religious context and interplay between the actions, sentiments and rhetoric of terror groups, their constituency and the perceived oppressor/enemy. When looking at the motivations on the organizational level we must acknowledge that terror-sponsoring organizations are largely political in their motivations and resort to terrorism when other political solutions have failed and to suicide terrorism when a specific set of circumstances exist. Researchers of suicide terrorism know that suicide terrorism is nearly always used strategically by organizations and generally resorted to only when the enemy is much stronger and better equipped militarily. Likewise it is often used in later stages of the conflict (Bloom, 2005), sometimes reflects an outbidding process for power among competing groups (Bloom, 2005) and finds a receptive base of support in areas where occupation occurs, particularly if the foreign occupier is of another religion than those occupied and is perceived as oppressive and unjust (Pape, 2005; Speckhard, 2005a; Speckhard & Ahkmedova, 2005; Speckhard &

Ahkmedova, 2006b). When these circumstances exist, suicide terrorism may be deemed an effective choice by terror sponsoring organizations for forcing concessions from its stronger enemy and thereby achieving its political goals.

Ideologies of Suicide Terrorism – Religion and Cosmic Warfare

Currently the strongest ideology supporting suicide terrorism makes use of distorted versions of Islam. As anyone who has studied the history of warfare knows, religion is often invoked to send warriors out to battle, as believing that one is dying for a higher cause is highly motivating. Nearly *all major faiths* have in the past been used in this way and still are. Just as nearly all nations going to war today still make use of religious rhetoric when looking for popular support and to motivate their warriors - so too do many of today's terror sponsor groups (consider the rhetoric of the Crusades and the just war debates carried on in the west prior to invading Afghanistan and Iraq). While the loosely affiliated Al Qaeda/ global Salafi terrorist groups do not represent legitimate nation states, they claim that they are acting in behalf of a group of beleaguered people, that they are in a war, and their ideology is aimed to motivate warriors for the battle. The difference is not so much in the use of religion to garner popular support for acts of war and to motivate warriors but in the distortions of mainline religion to justify the tactic these warriors are motivated to adopt and the targeting of innocent civilians that their ideology justifies. We see in these current jihadist ideologies promulgated over the Internet and through underground networks the promotion of suicide terrorism, claiming it as the most effective way for these groups to triumph, and the manipulation of treasured religious principles valuing martyrdom in

behalf of Islam misused to motivate foot soldiers to self recruit themselves into suicide missions against innocent civilian targets.

When one considers the suicide terror groups uses of religion to motivate individuals to sign up to die, it makes strategic sense. Any believer of *any faith* who is persuaded of the following will act in extraordinary ways:

- He is in a cosmic battle (Juergensmeyer, 2000) involving apocalyptic forces;
- that will eradicate either his side or the other, hence necessitating a war of defense.
- He should dehumanize and even demonize his enemies by seeing them as the enemies of God.
- In joining the group and taking on it's values and teachings, he has learned the mind of God
- and is authorized to act in the battle by the will of God.
- The battle in which he is fighting is for sacred values (Atran, 2003).
- He may go to extraordinary means to eradicate and blot out those he sees as evildoers – even innocent civilians - who he believes are standing in the way of and offending God's will.

It is important to state however that even though groups that make use of distorted versions of Islam are currently highly effective in promoting this cosmic warfare ideology to endorse the tactic of suicide terrorism, this does not mean that Islam is the problem. If it were, we would not have seen the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), who are mainly Marxist atheists making use of this same tactic. In their cases they made

no reference to Islam; nor religion at all, but relied upon charismatic leadership, deep-seated anger over nationalistic concerns and injustices, and the hope of becoming heroes for their cause to motivate human bombing recruits. Likewise many cults have made similar use of non Islamic religions to induce an apocalyptic vision of the world in which the believers became willing to endorse violence and even kill and die in order to bring it about - these including: the Aum Shinryko -the Japanese Hindu related cult responsible for the sarin gas poisonings in the Tokyo metro; the Peoples Temple cult following Jim Jones who made a suicide pact and killed themselves and their families resulting in over nine hundred deaths; the Army of God - Christian based abortion clinic bombers; and so on.

While Islam is currently being misused to promote suicide terrorism it is not in itself the problem. The problem is powerful links terrorists groups are able to make between individual motivations to self-sacrifice, societal circumstances leading to despair and defiance, and the linking of these with a hijacked version of Islam which playing upon sacred scriptures promotes human sacrifice in behalf of the group. Any distorted mainstream religion can be distorted and used to motivate for suicide terrorism by framing it as an ideology in support of self sacrifice in a cosmic war of defense for the true faith. Currently the main ideology in use among the most active suicide terrorist groups (i.e. the loosely affiliated Al Qaeda/global Salafi and other nationalistic militant jihadist linked groups) is a hijacked version of Islam calling for would be martyrs from around the world to sacrifice themselves in behalf of a worldwide or nationalist jihad.

Individual Motivations

But why would anyone answer the call? Why do most of the main terror groups in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and elsewhere state that they have an endless supply of recruits – like the Chechen female bomber who spoke on a prepared video broadcast during the Dubrovka/Nord Ost theater takeover in Moscow where eight hundred hostages were held for three days, stating, “Even if we are killed, thousands of our brothers and sisters will come after us ready to sacrifice themselves,” (Jazeera, 2002, Oct. 24, 2002).

Certainly there must be something much more powerful than simply an ideology that will make an individual cross the line from normal daily life to becoming a person who straps on a bomb, or gets into an airplane, car or truck intent on exploding himself among civilians. What are the factors that cause these changes to occur within a human soul?

While the answer is multifaceted and impossible to answer in a short entry, our research speaking to bombers, would be bombers, senders and the family members and close acquaintances of bombers and their hostages has pointed to two main motivational sets (Speckhard, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, April 2005; Speckhard & Ahkmedova, 2005, 2006; Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Speckhard *et al.*, 2004; Speckhard *et al.*, 2005a, 2005b):

Trauma- Based Motivations. The first motivational set is a trauma based and occurs within zones of active conflict. It is often: nationalistic; viewed in terms of self and community defense; expressive regarding meting out justice to the perceived enemy occupier; and includes acts of revenge. The individuals motivated within this set have witnessed firsthand and over the television their

neighbors, family members and loved ones killed by what they view as an occupying force. Many have grown up witnessing countless acts of violence and as a result have not developed normally and often suffer from posttraumatic stress and dissociative disorders. Many have lost jobs, educational opportunities, been humiliated, and often struggle for basic daily needs and security. While the majority of traumatized individuals in conflict zones will not become suicide bombers even if invited to do so, an extremely small group will become vulnerable to terrorist ideologies that promote this tactic. Feeling constantly agitated by traumatic flashbacks, unable to avoid daily reminders of their traumatic losses, feeling in constant danger, bereaved, angry and impotent, these individuals ultimately become so dissociative (i.e. separated from normal thoughts, perceptions and emotions) and emotionally numb that they often refer to themselves as “already dead”. Actually for them dying is no longer a feared outcome: they already have psychologically and emotionally numbed themselves to human suffering, yet it keeps mercilessly and painfully intruding into their thoughts, that death may seem as a welcome release. Embracing it and exerting some control over when and how it occurs is sadly welcomed by these traumatized individuals.

In response to threat a normal person moves between a fight or flight response and will only move into dissociative defenses (i.e. shutting down normal features of consciousness such as emotions, logic, and memory and sometimes physically freezing as well) when the threat becomes overwhelmingly horrific, terrifying and life-threatening. When this distinction was explained to him, Al Aqsa Martyr’s Brigade sender of suicide bombers Zecharia Zubeidi

explains the individuals he equips to become human bombs are according to his observations caught inflexibly over long periods of time in a dissociative mode. He states that while combatants are flexible in their responses to violent conflict these victims of the conflict are not. "They are completely different than us (fighters). They have only one decision. We have many options. The thought of running away is always available. We can go and shoot." In contrast he describes the martyrs as locked into an inflexible dissociative mode caused by traumatic stress and the one decision that comes from it. He states "They get flashbacks all the time and for them death is a mercy...For the martyr all the cells in his mind are dead except for one." According to Zubeidi suicide bombers are in too much psychic pain to find another way to cope and become totally fixated on carrying out what they view as acts of community defense, expressions of pain and enacting justice in response to "all that they have seen". Explaining their psychological inflexibility in reference to his own dissociative states which occur from time to time (also in response to traumatic experience) he states, "When I feel this way I stay there one or two hours, but that one (a bomber), after all that he has observed there is only that one thing (i.e. to end his life in behalf of the community)."

Suicide bombers are often as well or better-educated and less poor than their peers (Atran, 2004; Merari, 2003) and in other circumstances might have been leaders in their communities. They are acutely sensitive to their own suffering and that of those around them and wish to make a difference, but similar to normally depressed and suicidal persons, they see only very limited avenues of action. They want to escape their psychic pain but to do so honorably and to use

their lives – even if it means dying - to help their communities. They are uniquely vulnerable to an ideology that promises that they will be heroes for the cause and that they can make a difference in the socio-political situation faced by their communities. They believe that their deaths are only a doorway to a better place and that by dying self sacrificially they can change things both now and in the afterlife, reuniting now with those gone before and later bringing with them relatives that they left behind. Vulnerable and in pain they succumb to an ideology that seduces them into sacrificing themselves for what they believe is a greater cause. Just like us they hope for a more just world in which human dignity and rights will be upheld, however unlike us - they have been deluded into believing that their acts of killing even innocent civilians might bring this into being - and for this they sacrifice themselves.

Alienation, Marginalization, Loss of Identity, Secondary Traumatization and Desire for Life Meaningfulness, Belonging and Heroism

The second motivational set involves actors not living in conflict zones and is more complex. While an individual who has seen his family member killed in front of his eyes and feels his country has been occupied might be understood for seeking revenge, one must ask about what can possibly motivate Europeans, Turks, Moroccans, Uzbeks, and others to join such groups ultimately agreeing to die in order to kill others? In their cases the main motivational set appears to involve vulnerable actors who are exposed through kin and friendship groups (Sageman, 2004) or through Internet and informal recruiting⁴ to other individuals

⁴ In Brussels we have found that there are Internet cafes where if one logs on for a half

within a terror network. In their cases these individuals are often marginalized, frustrated and without hope in their societies. In Europe they are often first, second or third generation immigrants or converts to Islam who feel deep sympathy and even kinship (i.e. as “Muslim brothers”) for those in conflict zones. Within the migrant community there is often a deep sense of alienation and no secure sense of identity and belonging in either their country of origin and more importantly their host culture. Facing discrimination, often well educated but facing poor job prospects, lacking positive identity and sense of life meaning and having little else to make of themselves, once exposed to terrorist ideologies they are attracted to the appeal to become heroes for a cause.

In these cases nearly always the sponsoring organization makes use of five powerful motivators. The first two are the idea of belonging and identity – belonging to an important cause and group - and taking on a heroic identity. The third is the use of pictures and graphic video footage of conflict zones that are shown to the potential recruit and interpreted as atrocities against innocent victims – mainly featuring Chechen and Palestinian suffering, but now also featuring footage and references to the US coalition’s “War on Terrorism” in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Just as relief organizations in our societies often uses pictures and video footage of human suffering to motivate us to give to worthy causes, these organizations do the same, playing upon the emotional reactions of their audiences to find the individuals vulnerable enough to respond to their calls to action.

hour or so pop up adds appear inviting one to join the worldwide jihad.

In the European case where distorted Islamic ideologies are being used, often those individuals who become terrorist recruits are sensitive and care about the conflicts they learn about but are not able to read in Arabic and fall prey to teachers who tell them they know and can interpret the Koran better for them and teach them based on Islam the proper response to address such suffering. This is not to say they are simple minded – quite the contrary – often it is the well educated and sensitive individuals who read news and care about the world and who would be leaders if they felt they had a way of participating in their society and its political discourse. Frustrated by lack of opportunities to help others in need and needing a meaningful role and identity they find answers in terrorist groups.

Fourth and fifth are the ideas often taken from religion – that one ought to sacrifice in behalf of the brotherhood of the believers. In this manner the ideas of “fictive kin” (Atran, 2003) and martyrdom are instilled. The individuals who respond to such calls to action are appealed upon to depart from the frustrations of this life, reject the society that has marginalized or frustrated them and join a group following a path that promises eternal rewards. Suddenly the individual who was previously frustrated, feeling worthless, had little hope and so on feels a sense of belonging, a firm identity and purpose in what will soon turn out to be a foreshortened life.

The words of a disillusioned radical (Speckhard, 2005c) living in Brussels, Belgium illustrate how he was radicalized and then found his way out of it. This young man (age 24) was adopted from Rwanda to white Belgium parents. Growing up as the only black in his community he was alienated and confused about his identity. In search for his

“African” roots he found Islam, converted at age fifteen and started attending a radical mosque where he fell under the influence of extremist militant wahhabist teachers. “If you say to yourself this thing is God’s will, you have to do it. It’s simple, if you can’t read in Arabic and people tell you that you cannot understand and you have to do it. I tried very sincerely to do so. I followed everything, the prayer schedule, eating and way of drinking all in the Sunnah. But there are also ideas about jihad. At age nineteen I was ready to go to Lebanon and fight for my brother Palestinian. I didn’t know politics but I had an idea we had some Muslim community, our brothers that we must defend.”

Speaking about how he became ready to become a martyr he explains, “When I went to Morocco with my wife to her mother’s house I saw Al Manar – Lebanon TV. They have a way to mix religion and politics. I can understand it because there is a true crisis in Palestine. . . . What I saw on the television was two Israeli soldiers taking big stones and breaking the bones of a Palestinian man, breaking his arm bones, his shoulders, all the bones in his hands, all the bones in his feet, his ribs, smashing them with a big rock. I’m sure they killed him or left him to die. I couldn’t understand all of the Arabic (he was beginning to learn Arabic at this time) but I didn’t need language to understand – it was all there in the pictures. Imagine people see that in the morning, get breakfast and see that on their television. When you see that you feel there is a unity of Muslim people. I decided to go there. I was completely crazy. I had a wife and baby but I thought I would go anyway.”

Thankfully this young man found his way out of the radical groups by studying Arabic and religion intensively until he

found his own answers independent of the militant teachers he had fallen under. Looking back at how close he came to going to be a “martyr” he explains, “At that time I was a believing radical. For a radical you can die and kill for God no problem. I can die or be killed at anytime. I knew people who went to Afghanistan as bombers, the people who killed Mousad. To get the connections to go, here in Brussels, is no problem.” Reflecting on how he got out he explains, “The problem is you see all the people, politics, everything – you see through the Koran and it’s your perspective. Likewise he recalls that at that time, “I was completely lost” and reflects that it’s difficult to question what is being taught if you don’t learn Arabic. “The difference between me (having left the radical groups) and the others is my studies.”

Adopting a Terrorist Ideology as Psychological First Aid

In both motivational sets the ideology of the terror-sponsoring group is acting as a psychological first aid for the victim of other grievances. This psychological first aid is of course short lived – as is its victim. Yet ones sees a powerful transformation take place in the human bomber who seeing no way to change his circumstances moves from a stance of a powerless victim of societal forces to becoming an actor in a worldwide or nationalistic drama that he has been persuaded might bring about a more just and dignified existence for those left behind. In this way a marriage occurs between a terror promoting ideology and individual psycho-social vulnerabilities emanating out of traumatic and bereaving experiences in conflict zones and marginalizing and frustrating circumstances in non-conflict zones. When this marriage occurs all that is left is for the individual to believe that there is

some significant portion of society that supports his stepping out into this path (it may be the group that recruits him) that enables him to take the final steps to martyrdom. This is where societal support for suicide terrorism plays an important role in putting a martyr upon the path to becoming a human bomb.

Societal Support for Suicide Terrorism

When a society deplors violence as an answer to violence and terrorism as an answer to social problems its unlikely that ideologies supporting suicide terrorism will resonate strongly within more than extremely limited groups of vulnerable individuals. However when a society or significant elements of it begin to embrace an ideology in support of suicide terrorism then these groups of potential recruits will expand exponentially. We witnessed this when a “cult of martyrdom” sprung up among Palestinians during the second Intifada that made their pool of potential recruits seemingly endless.

How does this occur? Again it is a confluence of factors: when a society is so offended and even traumatized by daily living circumstances as a result of war, conflict, human rights violations, marginalization, frustrations and daily humiliations, and many individuals feel powerless to change these assaults to human dignity the society can begin to support terrorist ideologies, especially those that espouse familiar and valued religious ideals, believing that terror acts may bring about change. In this case the society begins to indoctrinate its children in support of suicide terror. Posters, songs and videos may become prevalent throughout the society in support of martyrdom (i.e. suicide terrorism) and the society as a whole may begin to resonate with the aims and ideology of the terror-sponsoring group.

This is most important to avoid when considering the fight against suicide terrorism. There will likely always be fringe groups that promote dying to kill. There will also always be individuals who are vulnerable to recruitment by these groups. However, we unwittingly create the circumstances in which the pool of recruits expands exponentially when we fail to address the societal factors leading to individual vulnerability and societal support that make these groups impossible to extinguish, and self replenishing faster than we can stop them. In these cases their pool of recruits becomes so large that the terror groups can go on forever. Likewise we must begin to address and take apart the rhetoric of terror sponsoring organizations – addressing their ideologies by engaging with them in a discourse that can perhaps lead to more, instead of less people believing that political solutions do exist and terror acts are neither necessary nor useful in bringing about a just, moral and dignified existence.

As far as the involvement of a hijacked version of Islam in the majority of the most current cases of suicide bombing we must acknowledge two things. Firstly, Islam is a religion that has always valued the struggle for three fundamental values – justice, morality and human dignity and it is only natural that when a terror group is hoping to motivate recruits it can appeal through Islamic traditions to action in behalf of these fundamental values (especially if it can argue that one is acting in self and community defense). Indeed this idea of self and community defense has been the basis of nearly all fatwas in support of martyrdom (i.e. suicide missions). Secondly, a majority of the world’s Islamic populations live under corrupt and autocratic regimes, face numerous human rights violations,

territorial occupations and/or discrimination hence there are many *political* reasons that Islamic people might gravitate to a terrorist ideology that shares with them the *political* goals of fighting for freedom and human dignity. Religion is simply the vehicle for uniting them and giving them courage for fighting (in whatever mistaken or brutal ways they chose) for the *political* goals they share. When we mistakenly believe that Islam itself is the problem and begin to assault deeply valued religious traditions and beliefs we only fuel the fires of the currently “in vogue” terrorism ideologies.

There is also a contagion effect that we must consider that occurs even with normal suicide – those who are in the family and friendship network of a suicide bomber are often so deeply affected by the act that they too begin to consider acting similarly. We have found countless examples of radicalization proceeding through close friendship and relatives networks as have other authors (Sageman, 2004). Thus radicalization can increase geometrically once it gets going.

Suicide terrorism is a complex psycho-social and political issue and demands thoughtful, just and carefully carried out responses to bring an end to its continued and increasing use to influence worldwide politics.

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In recent years I have had the opportunity with my colleagues to interview incarcerated suicide terrorists; potential recruits for human bombers; senders of suicide terrorists; members of terrorists groups; and perhaps most importantly family members, hostages and close associates of accomplished bombers to ask about the bombers, the events and the

influences that motivated these individuals to choose to die in this way and thereby to construct a psychological autopsy of them. These interviews concerned Chechen, Palestinian, Lebanese, Uzbek and Moroccan suicide terrorism and radicalization of groups in Europe and took place in Chechnya, North Ossetia, Russia, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Israel, the Netherlands, France, United Kingdom and Belgium. Special thanks to Khapta Akhmedova, Mokhtar Benabdallaoui, Valery Krasnov, Natalia Mufel, Yoram Schweitzer and Nadejda Tarabrina for helping me in making interviews and to my students Ken Reidy and Valentijn Vanrompay who accompanied me on trips to the Palestinian territories. I am also indebted to Scott Atran, Nichole Argo, Mia Bloom, John Esposito, Rohan Gunaratna, Bruce Hoffman, Mark Juergensmeyer, Assaf Moghadam, Cerwyn Moore, Jerrold Post, Marc Sageman, Jessica Stern, Andrew Silke, Michael Taarnby, Reuven Paz, John Horgan and many others who have contributed to this field of research and helped me refine my technique, theory and added to my understanding of this complex phenomena in many ways - through conversations, critique of my work, and correspondence.

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