Conceptualizing Terrorist Violence and Suicide Bombing

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of different approaches to terrorist violence, with a particular focus on suicide terrorism, using the above mentioned levels of analysis as a conceptual framework to organize this study. In doing so, the article focuses primarily on four selected studies: Khashan's theory of collective Palestinian frustration operating at individual and structural levels; Pape's strategic theory of suicide terrorism, Devji's notion of global jihad, and Hammes' conceptualization of suicide terrorism as one of the strategies of Fourth Generation Warfare, all studied at a strategic level. Drawing on these analyses, as well as on Tilly, this article attempts to address the question of whether suicide terrorism represents a "coherent phenomenon," and whether there is, or may be, a generalized pattern which could account for all possible causes of martyrdom operations.

Conceptualizing Terrorist Violence and Suicide Bombing

By Murad Ismayilov

Introduction

Though suicide terrorism has long been a focus of the world community's political agenda, there remains an intense debate between different approaches to explaining this social phenomenon. Tracking the logic of suicide terrorism, one should distinguish between motivation for a political decision to launch a martyrdom campaign (strategic level of analysis) and factors motivating individuals to serve as suicide bombers (individual and structural levels of analysis).

Attempts by social scientists to explain martyrdom operations may be classified into two alternative groups: rational choice theories and irrational models. While the former, operating mainly at a strategic level, view terrorist violence as inherently rational action perpetrated by purposeful agents, the latter, normally operating at an individual level of martyrs or a structural level of a broader society in which those martyrs are embedded, ascribe it to psychological and/or social causes (e.g. fanaticism).[1]

This article presents an analysis of different approaches to terrorist violence, with a particular focus on suicide terrorism, using the above mentioned levels of analysis as a conceptual framework to organize this study. In doing so, the article focuses primarily on four selected studies: Khashan's theory of collective Palestinian frustration operating at individual and structural levels;[2] Pape's strategic theory of suicide terrorism,[3] Devji's notion of global jihad,[4] and Hammes' conceptualization of suicide terrorism as one of the strategies of Fourth Generation Warfare,[5] all studied at a strategic level. Drawing on these analyses, as well as on Tilly,[6] this article attempts to address the question of whether suicide terrorism represents a "coherent phenomenon," and whether there is, or may be, a generalized pattern which could account for all possible causes of martyrdom operations.

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Individual vs. Structural Levels of Analysis: Terrorist Violence as an Irrational Act

Most scholars studying suicide terrorism from the perspective of an individual attacker have focused on, and emphasized, the irrationality of the suicide act. In doing so, they have attributed the latter to psychological (individual) or broader social (structural) causes. For example, one of the possible explanations of the alleged normalcy with which Palestinians (and others) commit a suicide act can be described as "sheer repetition."[7] Indeed, it would be difficult to argue against the fact that the continuous sense of fear that the Palestinians observe and go through, both in their daily lives and in media coverage, has long transformed—for most of them—an act of laying down one's life in the name of a bigger struggle into normalized behavior. The latter concept lends credibility to Kelley's notion of a "learning process" that legitimizes suicide bombings among Palestinians, or Juergensmeyer's notion of a "Palestinian culture of violence."[8] Khashan also emphasizes a collective "suicidal mentality" as a structural factor driving Palestinian suicide bombings, as opposed to individual predispositions to martyrdom operations.[9] Given the relatively small number of Palestinian suicide attacks from 1993 (when the first such an attack took place) onwards, however, a "culture of martyrdom" can barely serve as a single causal factor explaining the Palestinian drive for suicide terrorism.

Other factors, structural and individual, to which the inclination to endorse, and to participate in, martyrdom operations is normally attributed include religious indoctrination and fanaticism, poverty, youth, psychological predispositions, and lack of education.

Religious Fanaticism

Religious fanaticism is perhaps the most commonly-invoked socio-psychological factor by which Western observers try to explain the martyrdom phenomenon. Those who favor this argument usually refer to different Muslim traditions and the Quran itself as promising the martyr (*shahid*) and his family numerous rewards in the world beyond.[10] Many also tend to view the Shia concept of self-sacrifice in pursuit of justice as an explanatory factor in this context.[11]

Others, however, who analyze the role of Islam in political violence, insist that it has nothing to do with religion. Rather, this group of scholars ascribes violence to Islam's *political* agenda of establishing an Islamic state.[12] This latter perspective on the nexus between Islam and political

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violence brings us from an individual/structural level of analysis to the strategic one, and creates a rational explanatory framework for *collective* efforts of suicide bombers, while ignoring the multitude of their individual motivations.

On the other hand, Pape rightly mentions that suicide terrorism is not confined to Islamic fundamentalism. The suicide activities of Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, long proponents of suicide terrorism and adherents of an atheistic Marxist/Leninist ideology, are a bright manifestation of this phenomenon.[13] Even the members of so-called Islamic fundamentalist organizations, such as al-Qaida, are now argued to be void of adherence to any specific Islamic tradition, with many of those coming from a rather secular education.[14]

While Islamic fanaticism and other psychological and socioeconomic variables do have certain explanatory power, none of these is either necessary or sufficient for a suicide bombing to occur. Hilal Khashan's empirical study on Palestinian refugees in South Lebanon—one in which the author attempts to find general environmental or circumstantial patterns that would help explain Palestinians' support for and proneness to perpetrate suicide bombings—lays bare how some of the factors may come into play in one set of circumstances, and be rather irrelevant in a different context.[15]

For his part, Khashan, on the one hand, suggests that the refugees' endorsement of and personal participation in suicide bombings are determined by youth, strong commitment to political Islam, and severe social and economic conditions (education and income). On the other hand, he concludes that gender and what he terms social functionality (the combination of self-esteem, social trust, optimism, sanctity of life, and personal competence) are irrelevant in terms of explaining the refugees' support for suicide bombings. Drawing on his research project—one confined to only a limited number of people and a limited geographic area, namely, 342 Palestinian *refugees* (a single category of potential martyrs) from South Lebanon—Khashan argues that there is a discernible pattern one could descry in the suicide bombing phenomena. Khashan's findings, however, suggest a different, more compelling conclusion.[16] Even within the limited context in which the study took place, no common causal pattern could be discerned. As Khashan's study unveils, the willingness of the camp refugees to carry out suicide operations is mainly a function of political Islam, while among urban refugees it is income—not Islam—that explains proneness to commit a suicide attack (which, in turn, the author explains by referring to the relative deprivation theory).[17]

Khashan's findings, hence, reveal several variations in causal factors, even in a bounded political/spatial context, such as in the case study on South Lebanon. This, in turn, renders it ever more difficult to come up with any common pattern to account for all possible causes of martyrdom operations.[18]

Strategic Level of Analysis: Terrorist Violence as a Rational Act

Scholars who follow rational choice theory argue that terrorism should be understood as a strategy adhered to toward achieving certain aims. For example, in his article "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists," Charles Tilly contends that "terror is a [political] strategy, not a creed," and, as such, represents "asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies using means that fall outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within some current regime."[19] The terrorist strategy, according to Tilly, has "a crude logic of its own," insofar as it sends "signals that the target is vulnerable, that the perpetrators exist, and that the perpetrators have the capacity to strike again." These signals are typically addressed to three different audiences: "the targets themselves, potential allies of the perpetrators, and third parties that might cooperate with one or the other." Importantly, terrorist violence, Tilly argues, is normally not an end in itself, but rather is perpetrated in support of at least four demands: recognition, redress, autonomy, or transfers of power. Hence, for Tilly, terror is a strategy aimed at altering or inhibiting the target's disapproved behavior, fortifying the perpetrators' standing with potential allies, and moving third parties toward greater cooperation with the perpetrators' organization and announced program.[20]

The U.S. State Department's definition of terrorism—"politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience"[21]—also implies intentionality, and hence rationality, behind terrorist violence.

Different studies that discuss the possibility of a single, coherent explanation for the logic of martyrdom operations, or jihad in general, have devised arguments that fit in the generic framework that Tilly suggested for terrorist violence as a strategy. Euben, for example, argues that jihad, as it is invoked and practiced today by the Islamist "fundamentalists," is a form of political action which links the perpetrators' moral objective, that is pursuit of immortality and salvation, with the political endeavor of "the founding or recreation" of a single Muslim political community, that is a

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legitimate *umma*, to exist "beyond a single lifetime." This link between immortality and politics "makes political action not merely instrumentally but existentially significant."[22] Khashan, on the other hand, brings together pursuit of immortality and the desire "to achieve a balance of terror with Israel's overwhelming military machine" in his attempt to explain the strategic intentions of suicide bombers.[23]

Drawing upon numerous interviews conducted in the West Bank, Lori Allen reveals that Palestinians view suicide attacks as a political aim that is "striking back at the Israeli occupation." She stresses that Palestinians view targeting Israeli civilians as "the only way to make Israelis notice what their government is doing" and, thereby, place pressure on their Prime Minister to leave the Occupied Territories.[24] This paradigm makes explicit the rationality that guides some Palestinians who endorse martyrdom operations.

One of the most comprehensive system-level theories of suicide terrorism has been developed by Robert Pape who, based on his study of the universe of suicide terrorist attacks worldwide from 1980 to 2001 (in sum, 188), argues that suicide terrorism follows a strategic logic.[25] Echoing Tilly, Pape insists that, notwithstanding irrationality and fanaticism of many individual suicide attackers:

> "viewed from the perspective of the terrorist organization, suicide attacks are designed to achieve specific political purposes: to coerce a target government to change policy, to mobilize additional recruits and financial support, or both."[26]

In bringing the individual and strategic levels of analysis together, Pape suggests that suicide terrorism may be regarded as an extreme form of what theorist Thomas Schelling called "the rationality of irrationality…in which an act that is irrational for individual attackers is meant to demonstrate credibility to a democratic audience that still more and greater attacks are sure to come."[27]

Though a viable theory in its own right, Pape's argument suffers from a major flaw, which is in his insistence that the strategic logic of suicide terrorism lies in pursuit of specific territorial goals (like the withdrawal of the target state's military forces from what the terrorists would see as a national homeland), an assertion harshly debated by some other scholars as applied to the case of al-Qaida's jihad.

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Jihad and Suicide Terrorism

An alternative view to Pape is provided by Faisal Devji, who, echoing Oliver Roy,[28] argues that national liberation struggles (what he calls "local struggles"), as well as hard and disturbed economic and social conditions, are not the main causes of al-Qaida's global jihad.[29] Rather, while viewing the localized struggles as mere stereotypes, he sees the main cause of jihad as a de-territorialized anti-imperialist struggle toward achieving a caliphate. For Devji, jihad subordinates local struggles to a global objective, in that struggles in particular states are only important instrumentally so long as they serve to promote the metaphysical goals of Islam as global entity.

The rationality of terrorist violence is supported by the view that al-Qaida's endorsement of suicide terrorism pioneered a new form of networked militancy and, as such, represents one of the strategies of the Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW). This view has been adopted by Colonel Thomas Hammes, an American expert in counterinsurgency warfare.[30] A strategic logic of the suicide terrorism within this framework is clear insofar as the 4GW, in Hammes' definition, "uses all available networks—political, economic, social, and military—to convince the enemy's political decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit"[31]—a definition again echoing Tilly's framework for terrorism in general.[32] Thus, Hammes views al-Qaida as "a model for a 4GW networked, transnational enemy," which manifests itself, among other things, in its active use of media as a means to communicate its ideas and beliefs worldwide, its reluctance to claim responsibility for its terrorist attacks, and its being a highly networked organization.[33]

Hammes' view is also shared by the U.S. State Department which views al-Qaida as having "many characteristics of a 'globalized insurgency,'" which employs a number of strategies (among which are subversion, sabotage, open warfare), terrorist violence being only one of them.[34]

Toward a Viable Coherent Theory

The variety of approaches, both at individual and structural levels of analysis on the one hand and a strategic level on the other, beg for a question on whether a single coherent theory can account for all cases of suicide terrorism.

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In the first wave of explanations of suicide terrorism, which focused on individual characteristics and predispositions of the suicide bombers, Pape suggested that "there may not be a single profile" common to all suicide bombers.[35] Indeed, there may be a range of profiles from religiously-indoctrinated, uneducated, unemployed, poor, socially-isolated, single men to secular, well-educated, employed, rich, married and socially well-integrated men or women; a fact that renders any proactive policy planning rather impotent. As Pape rightly notes, "although only a tiny number of people become suicide terrorists, they come from a broad cross section of lifestyles, and it may be impossible to pick them out in advance."[36] Khashan's study also nicely demonstrates that different factors come into play in different contexts.[37]

On the other hand, Tilly questions the feasibility of even developing a theory of terrorist violence, let alone suicide terrorism, at the *strategic* level, arguing that, because of a "remarkable array of actors [that] sometimes adopt terror as a strategy...no coherent set of cause-effect propositions can explain terrorism as a whole."[38] Tilly goes on to state that "terrorism is not a single coherent phenomenon," insofar as "terrorists range across a wide spectrum of organizations, circumstances, and beliefs."[39] The terrorist strategy may be employed, according to Tilly, by at least four types of actors (militias, conspirators, autonomists, and zealots), which Tilly distinguishes along the criteria of whether they are violent specialists or not, and whether they deploy terror within their own operating territories or direct it elsewhere.[40] Because these four actors are engaged in four varieties of politics against at least four varieties of victims, there is, Tilly concludes, no way to theorize terrorism as "a single causally coherent phenomenon."[41]

Further complicating the issue is the fact that there is no agreement as to a single approach even when it comes to a single "type" of terror, such as suicide terrorism; a problem exposed by the theories developed by Pape, Devji, and Hammes. While each of those theories captures a certain aspect of this complex social phenomenon, none is able to account for all cases; nor is any even capable of covering all aspects within individual cases.

Importantly, the political implication is that each of these approaches suggests a different, sometimes even contradictory, set of strategies to counterterrorism. Thus, while socio-economic models beg for generic measures aimed at improving conditions in the global South, Hammes suggests that the United States, in its efforts to effectively counter global jihad, should adjust its military machine to fighting Fourth Generation Warfare; an effort that would require a cultural and organizational shift to

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an interagency approach, greater focus on people than on technology, careful analysis of each individual threat, and greater flexibility.[42]

In contrast to Hammes' offensive military action strategy, Pape suggests defensive measures as the best way to counter international terrorism, and recommends that states facing suicide terrorism "should invest significant resources in border defenses and other means of homeland security" thereby reducing "terrorists' confidence in their ability to carry out such attacks on the target society."[43]

Devji, in turn, views non-territorial jihad as an exclusively internal conflict for the United States—one between the state's responsibility to provide for individual liberties of all of its citizens on the one hand and the urge to provide for their security on the other—and as such "existing beyond America's war-making potential." This being so, the only way for the United States to address the threat of jihad, Devji concludes, is "by attacking itself," that is by "subverting the constitutional provisions of its own civil liberties and impeding the demographic, financial and technological mobility that provide the foundations of its own economic might;" a move that would make the United States a "suicide state, its martyrdom mirroring the many martyrdoms of the jihad."[44]

Conclusion

Ultimately, current research is inadequate to support a single coherent theory capable of accounting for all possible cases of suicide terrorism. Both theories trying to explain individual motivation for suicide terrorism and those that seek to analyze the rationale behind a political decision to launch a martyrdom campaign are necessary but not sufficient for understanding a social phenomenon as complex as suicide terrorism. While theories operating at individual and structural levels of analysis stop short of explaining why suicide attacks cease when the agenda of political leadership shifts away from martyrdom operations, strategic approaches alone cannot explain, or account for, individual motivations to contribute to those operations. The implication is that the development of a single set of policy measures to ward off the threat of martyrdom operations becomes simply impossible. The solution, for now, calls for a multidimensional and individual approach in dealing with this social phenomenon exclusively on a case-by-case basis.

Conceptually, the debate between structural and individual levels of analysis, on which different attempts to explain individual motivations for suicide terrorism reside, mirrors a broader structure-agency debate

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currently under way in international relations theory. And like the latter's tentative conclusions suggest, the relationship between the two levels is not unidirectional but rather mutually constitutive with one level informing, and simultaneously being informed by, the other in many interesting ways. The mechanism through which this mutual constitution occurs is context specific; the reality to which every case of terrorism in general, and suicide terrorism in particular, owes its sense of uniqueness, and the phenomenon which should be analyzed and deconstructed for every individual case before any attempt at countering terrorism (in a particular context) is pursued.

About the Author

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11 Khashan 2003, 2003, 1050.

12 Ibid., 1052–1053.

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13 Pape 2003, 343.

14 See, for example, Devji 2005.

15 Khashan 2003.

16 Khashan 2003, 1056.

17 Ibid., 1060–1064.

18 Attesting to the diversity of motivating factors for individual martyrs are also fac-tors that are claimed to normally encourage women (usually from nationalist groups, rather than from fundamentalist Islamic groups) to participate in suicide operations. Thus, according to Schweitzer, what motivates those women in their actions is their "profound desire to prove equality with their male peers." Yoram Schweitzer, "Suicide Terrorism: Development & Characteristics," *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, April 21, 2000, available at: *http://tinyurl.com/32bxht8 (www.ict.org.il/Articles/tabid/66/Articlsid/42/ currentpage/29/Default.aspx).*

19 Tilly 2004, 11.

20 Ibid., 9.

21 Ibid., 7.

22 Euben 2002, 9.

23 Khashan 2003, 1061. Khashan's argument nicely captures and brings together both individual and strategic levels of analysis in explaining suicide bombers' behavior.

24 Allen 2002, 34–37.

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28 Oliver Roy, *Globalised Islam: The search for a New Ummah* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006).

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33 Hammes 2006, 130. Interestingly, for Devji (2005, 5), "this anonymity or ambigu-ity of responsibility in the jihad...[is] an illustration of the anonymity or ambiguity of intentionality within al-Qaida's actions, which in turn is a reflection of the orga-nization's lack of control over its actions' outcomes."

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