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http://www.ivaw.org/ (Iraq Veterans Against War: information about US veterans who are against war)

http://www.ptsd.va.gov/ (National Center for PTSD, Department of Veterans Affairs, US Government: information about war trauma and PTSD among US veterans)

http://www.vfw.org/ (Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States: information about the veteran population in the United States)

Suicide Terrorism

NORAINI M. NOOR

Suicide terrorism is characterized as the targeted use of self-destructing humans against noncombatants, usually civilians, to bring about political change. While the goal of a suicide attack is to physically destroy an initial target, it is used primarily as a weapon of psychological warfare intended to influence the larger public audience. The main target is not those actually killed in the attack, but those who are made witness to it. The adversary's own media magnify the attack's effects on the target population.

Suicide attack is an ancient practice usually chosen as a weapon of terror by the weaker party against its materially stronger foe when other methods of fighting seem less likely to succeed. Though it accounts for a small number of all terrorist acts, it inflicts the largest number of casualties. The number of suicide attacks has increased from an average of less than five a year in the 1980s to 180 per year between 2000 and 2005, and from 81 suicide attacks in 2001 to 460 in 2005 (Atran, 2006). After 9/11, the attacks are increasingly seen to be more religiously, rather than politically, motivated.

SOME STEREOTYPES

Suicide terrorists have been described as evil, deluded, or murderous misfits who thrive in poverty and ignorance. While this "poverty-breeds-terrorism" argument has been used to profile suicide terrorists, these stereotypes are neither true nor useful (Atran, 2004; Krueger & Maleckova, 2003). Research has shown that suicide terrorists do not normally exhibit socially dysfunctional attributes (fatherless, friendless, jobless, etc.) or suicidal symptoms. In addition, they do not kill themselves simply out of hopelessness or a sense of having nothing to lose. As shown by Milgram's classic study on obedience, normal people under the right circumstances can readily be made to obey orders, not because of some innate murderous tendencies but from a sense of duty in situations of authority. (See OBEDIENCE; OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY.) Therefore, it would be more useful to understand and undermine the organizational and institutional appeal of terrorists' motivations and networks, rather than to profile individuals.

Another reason why personal despair or derangement may not be a significant factor in suicide terrorism relates to the cultures of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia (these are the countries with the most number of cases). Because they are deemed to be more collectivist than Western countries, with the tendency to emphasize family, group goals, and relationships, these societies are less tolerant of individuals acting independently from the group context. Therefore, in these societies, there must be support for the terrorist groups to exist.

CAUSES

To understand the conditions that give rise to these suicide groups, one needs to examine the history as well as the social–political–economic systems of the country. A collective sense of historical injustice, political subservience, perceived humiliation, and economic factors such as unemployment are among some of the reasons. Many of these countries are authoritarian, where people are repressed and where peaceful means of voicing dissatisfaction do not have much impact. They also fail to provide youth with outlets for political and economic advancement, making groups that cater to the social welfare of the people seem very appealing. In other words, these insurgent groups fill the void in many young people's lives.

To elaborate, these corrupt nationalist regimes, after independence, sought to eliminate secular opposition to maintain their grip on power and they initially supported the insurgent groups to gain popularity. In time, due to the corrupt nature of their governance, with the country's wealth lying only in the hands of the few, and where bureaucracies and army are given priority over the needs of the people, the insurgent groups act as charitable bodies, compensating for many of the shortcomings of the government. For example, the two largest Muslim social welfare organizations in Indonesia – Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama – provide schooling, health services, youth programs, poverty reduction, etc. to over 50 million people. Thus, by delegating the responsibility for the social welfare of their people to Islamic groups, these groups are able to gain popular support (note that I have used these two groups as an example, and not to denote that they are potential terrorist organizations).

Why might such groups choose suicide terrorism instead of more peaceful ways of acting? The main reason is the conditions of the societies they live in: the authoritarian regimes suppress peaceful means of voicing discontent, often pushing moderate opposition into a common cause with more radical groups. This violent strategy is then seen as the only way out due to the group's limited resources and power. Viewed in this manner, suicide terrorism is basically a form of political engagement – a response to political conditions and longstanding feelings of humiliation and frustration – albeit a violent one. That is why terrorist acts are more likely to be committed by people who grow up under repressive political regimes.

WHO ARE SUICIDE TERRORISTS?

While there are lone individuals who would carry out suicide terrorism (i.e., the poor, disfranchised souls who have nothing to lose, and joining the group provides them with a sense of belonging and purpose in life) – akin to the "poverty/ignorance-breeds-terrorism" hypothesis – the majority of suicide terrorists are normal people. In fact, suicide terrorists have been found to be more educated and relatively well-off financially when compared to most others in society. Due to their education and economic status, they are able to concern themselves with more than mere economic subsistence. Political involvement requires some minimum level of interest, expertise, commitment to issues, and effort. Usually, suicide terrorists are dissatisfied with what they see happening around them and feel they have to do something to change the existing political system. The impoverished, on the other hand, would be less likely to become engaged in terrorist organizations as their focus is more on day-to-day survival, rather than long-term political involvement.

The primary motivation for involvement is usually religious or ideological beliefs, which may differ from group to group.

Among Palestinians, perceptions of historical injustice combine with personal loss and humiliation at the hands of Israeli occupiers to nurture individual suicide terrorists and general popular support for terrorist acts. For the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, suicide terrorism is used to wage a secessionist campaign to create an independent Tamil state in the north and east of Sri Lanka. These beliefs and sentiments are typically expressed as community grievances and put to good use by the leadership of the groups, especially charismatic leaders.

Atran (2004, 2008), in his more recent field studies, found that the new crop of suicide terrorists (after 9/11) are different from the earlier ones. According to him, these individuals are generally less educated, economically and socially more marginal, and even younger than previous suicide terrorists. Via videos, Internet, and cable television, they have been sensitized to see themselves as oppressed by a godless or immoral ruling class. Because of the limited opportunities open to them, these young people hang out together, forming a social unit – a group of "friends" getting together, becoming "soccer buddies." When one of them decides to do something violent, the rest of the group follows. Therefore, according to Atran, the biggest predictor of suicide terrorism is not religious or ideological ideals but group dynamics. By hanging out together, doing the same things (eating the same foods, dressing in the same manner), they become "fictitious kin" who are then willing to die for each other. For these individuals, the motivation behind terrorist attacks is usually moral outrage – for example, at the sight of Israelis killing Palestinian children, or Americans denigrating Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib – and a desire to strike back. Atran also asserts that in these cases religious education is a negative indicator of terrorism. Those who form these terrorist cliques are usually made up of people with only a fairly basic

understanding of Islam. Atran sees these developments as part of a massive media-driven transnational political awakening which cannot be fought using the traditional top-heavy approaches of military might. Rather, it must be fought with ideas and proposals for action that appeal to this rising sense of injustice and moral outrage among increasing numbers of youth.

These findings suggest that the reasons for becoming a suicide terrorist may have changed over time. While there are suicide bombers who are ideologically and religiously motivated with the aim of reforming their own corrupt government who they believe are kept in power by the United States and Western nations, there are also many who are willing to die for the sake of fictitious kin. Therefore, with suicide terrorism, the challenge for peace psychology is to understand why normal individuals are willing to take their own lives.

HOW TO COUNTER TERRORISM

At present, military and other coercive approaches taken by the United States and Israel have not been effective, as indicated by the increased number of suicide attacks. Atran (2004) suggests three coordinated steps that can be taken to counter suicide terrorism: (1) understand and act on the root causes of terrorism via political, economic, and social programs, thereby reducing the receptivity of potential recruits; (2) penetrate and destroy terrorist organizations via a combination of intelligence and military action; and (3) protect sensitive populations and installations from attack using modern technology to prevent or reduce suicide terrorists' ability to hit their targets. According to Atran, current US funding for counterterrorism is focused on (2) and (3) but has done little in the way of understanding why individuals become terrorists and preventing them from becoming suicide terrorists in the

first place. Understanding the background conditions and the recruitment processes and addressing these root causes may be a more promising approach. Due to the lack of political and economic opportunities in these countries, conditions of relative deprivation may get to a point where the young actively seek alternative outlets (such as religious-inspired terrorist groups) to redress what they perceive as real historical grievances.

In order to persuade communities to stop supporting religious schools and charities that sustain terrorist networks, alternatives need to be put in place. At present, religious and terrorist groups often provide more education, medical, and social welfare services than the government. These programs fill an economic and social void, and can appeal to the rising sense of injustice and moral outrage among youth. Rather than dealing with these root causes, much of the counterinsurgency aid provided by the US State Department supports unpopular governments (e.g., the budget in fiscal year 2006 for Egypt was $1.287 billion; for Pakistan it was $297 million). These funds could instead be used to help train teachers, build schools, provide books and fellowships, and fund local programs for the people. Such assistance would provide competition with the services of religious and terrorist groups. Unless the young can dream other dreams that give meaning to their lives, terrorism will not cease.

Accompanying this assistance, the West as the champion of the world's democracies must be able to respect and accept a country's choice of representatives whom they may not like, or who may have different values or ways of doing things. In countries like Palestine, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, the United States and its allies should stop supporting brutal and repressive regimes, as this generates popular resentment and terrorist attacks (Atran, 2004). Krueger and Maleckova (2003), for example, did not find

a correlation between a nation's per capita income and terrorism, but did find correlations between terrorism and a lack of political rights and civil liberties.

There should also be concerted efforts by the international community to address the historical and personal grievances of people who have been denied the opportunity and power to realize their hopes and aspirations for personal security, collective peace, environmental sustainability, etc., as in the intractable conflicts of Israel–Palestine and Pakistan–Kashmir–India.

At the same time, dialogue between the United States and its allies with Muslim religious and community leaders needs to be intensified.

SEE ALSO: Obedience; Obedience to Authority.

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