The Evolution of Suicide Attacks

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Suicide terrorism is oftentimes described as a modern phenomenon, but a closer look at this tactic suggests that antecedents of suicide terrorism have existed for millennia. This chapter first reviews the precursors of suicide terrorism from the biblical Samson to the Islamic Revolution in Iran. It then traces the development of the modern phenomenon of suicide terrorism from 1979 to contemporary suicide attacks in Iraq. The third part describes the particularity of suicide attacks by Al Qaeda and its associated movements. The fourth part provides a brief overview of existing attempts to explain the causes of suicide attacks. The final part of the paper argues that suicide attacks by Al Qaeda and affiliated Salafi-Jihadist organizations have changed the pattern of suicide attacks altogether, thus requiring new approaches of understanding the phenomenon of suicide attacks.

Suicide Attacks in History

The modern phenomenon of suicide terrorism is often dated at the early 1980s, when a series of suicide attacks in Lebanon struck the Iraqi and American embassies as well as U.S., French, and later Israeli military targets. Antecedents of suicide attacks, however, can be found as early as biblical times.

Perhaps the first documented story of a suicide attacker is found in the Book of Judges of the Old Testament. It is the story of Samson, the biblical strongman who was betrayed by Delilah, a woman to whom he had revealed the secret of his strength. Delilah delivered that secret to the Philistines, who promptly imprisoned and tortured Samson. When the Philistines...
brought a sacrifice unto their god Dagon, they called in Samson to entertain them, placing him near the central pillars of their Gazan temple. Samson used his humiliation as an opportunity to exact revenge on his captors. According to the Bible, Samson asked God to give him strength to avenge the Philistines. “Let me die with the Philistines,” he cried out, before collapsing the temple, burying himself along with the assembled crowd that surrounded him.

Samson’s attack fits the classic definition of a suicide attack because his death was a precondition for the success of his vengeful act. Had Samson not died himself, he could not have killed the assembled Philistines. His utterance of the sentence “Let me die with the Philistines” embodies the very essence of the tactic of suicide operations, namely the confluence of the willingness to kill and to die.

Since these biblical times, suicide attacks have been employed as a tactic by nearly all religions at one point or another. Between the 11th and 13th centuries CE, the so-called Assassins, a radical Shia sect, employed suicide attacks, among other methods, to spread their own version of Islam. Their weapon of choice was the dagger, which they used in order to kill their enemies in broad daylight. The Assassins rarely attempted to escape from the scene after killing their victims, and seemed fearless in the face of their own death. According to Bernard Lewis, “the killing by the Assassin of his victim was not only an act of piety; it also had a ritual, almost sacramental quality. It is significant that in all their murders … the Assassins always used a dagger; never poison, never missiles, though there must have been occasions when these would have been easier and safer. The Assassin,” Lewis continues, “is almost always caught, and usually indeed makes no attempt to escape; there is even a suggestion that to survive a mission was shameful.”

debunked myth that members of this sect had been drugged with hashish—a belief that gave the Assassins (Hashashiyoun or Hashishiyyin in Arabic) their name.²

In more modern times, antecedents of suicide attacks were employed over the course of several centuries in three Muslim communities in the Malabar coast of southwestern India, Aceh in northern Sumatra, and Mindanao and Sulu in the southern Philippines.³ Dale ascribed the use of what he terms “suicidal attacks” in large part to the systematic exploitation of Western nation states of the local Muslim population and economy, coupled with the early religious zeal with which the Spanish and Portuguese attempted to Christianize the Muslim populations following the arrival of Vasco da Gama in the Indian Ocean in 1498. The attacks in Muslim India and Indonesia described by Dale, however, are not entirely consistent with the types of suicide attacks common today. The attack mode consisted of Muslim warriors “rush[ing] at the enemy, trying to kill as many of them as possible, until they themselves were killed.”⁴ Because their death was not necessary for the success of the attack, the attacks by these mujahideen are perhaps better described as precursors to modern-day suicide attacks.

Additional forerunners of the contemporary suicide attack phenomenon appeared in Russia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Several attacks by the Anarchist group Narodnaya Volya (‘The People’s Will’)—including, most prominently, the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881—involved the death of its perpetrator as an integral part of its mission. The assassination followed eight previous, unsuccessful attempts at the Tsar’s life. The ninth attempt at tyrannicide succeeded because one of the four Russian revolutionaries who equipped

² The Assassins did not call themselves Assassins, but feda‘i, which can roughly be translated as ‘devotee.’
⁴ Ibid., 51.
themselves with bombs on that day decided to detonate the bomb in such close proximity to the Tsar that it would ensure not only his target’s death but also his own.5

Prior to the contemporary proliferation of suicide attacks, perhaps the most prominent use of this modus operandi was by the Japanese kamikaze suicide pilots, who staged over 3,000 suicide sorties between October 1944 and August 1945. Japan, however, was not the only nation producing suicide attackers during World War II. During the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 and the Battle at Midway the following month, two U.S. airmen crashed their planes onto Japanese ships.6 Meanwhile, Soviet and German fighter pilots were ordered to crash their planes into enemy aircraft during desperate times, though that order seems to have been carried out only rarely.7

The use of suicide attacks by Japan and, to lesser extent, by other countries during World War II helps dispel some popular misconceptions about this modus operandi. These cases demonstrate that this tactic has not been used exclusively by terrorist organizations, but also by states. Second, and perhaps more importantly, along with the example of the Russian anarchists, the kamikaze missions provided early evidence that the use of suicide missions was not sanctioned exclusively by religion. Although almost all Japanese are nominally both Buddhist and Shinto, and many cherish Confucian values such as filial piety, submission for authority, and diligence, Japanese suicide attackers seemed to be motivated more by a desire to protect their country and their family rather than merely by a keen devotion to their Emperor.8

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5 On the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, see, for example, Bruce Hoffman, Inside Terrorism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 17-19.
Precursors to modern day suicide attacks have also emerged in the post-World War II period in Vietnam. According to Weinberg, during the Tet Offensive in 1968, special Viet Cong sapper units were sent on suicide missions against high prestige or high visibility targets.\(^9\) It is likely that in the majority of cases, the suicide teams dispatched by the North Vietnamese and their allies were what German soldiers describe as *Himmelfahrtskommandos*—units dispatched on missions that are so risky that they will result in almost certain death. That said, based on Weinberg’s findings, at least a number of these attacks seem to have been ‘conventional’ suicide attacks, i.e. operations in which the death of the perpetrators were a precondition for the success of the attack.\(^10\)

*Suicide Attacks after the Islamic Revolution*

The roots of the contemporary phenomenon of suicide terrorism that emerged in the early 1980s lie in the Islamic Revolution of Iran. More than any other regime that preceded it, Iran under Khomeini provided the religious and ideological justification for the use of violence in the name of Islam. Waging jihad fulfilled a core role within this framework, and self-sacrifice and martyrdom were extolled as the highest duty to God that a Muslim could perform. The idea of martyrdom as the most meritorious service to God reached its pinnacle during the early years of the Iran-Iraq war. Between 1981 and 1984, the Islamic Republic of Iran called upon masses of youth to volunteer for the so-called ‘human wave attacks.’ These attacks consisted of up to 20,000 children as young as 12 or 13 who were sent into the line of fire and across minefields, with no backup. Exploding the mines with their own bodies, these children were used to clear the way for the soldiers that followed them. In return for their almost certain death, the children were


\(^10\) Ibid., 119.
provided with a key which they wore around their neck. That key, they were told, would open the gate to paradise after they had become martyrs.

The cynical call for martyrdom made its next appearance in Lebanon. The first act of suicide terrorism of the modern era occurred in the Lebanese capital of Beirut in December 1981. 27 People died and more than 100 were wounded when a member of the Iranian-backed Shii group, Al Dawa (The Call), drove a bomb-laden car into the Iraqi embassy in Beirut.

Not before long, suicide attacks would also be aimed at Western targets in Lebanon. In April 1983, a suicide bomber drove an explosives-laden van into the U.S. embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people and wounding another 120. On October 23 of that year, suicide bombers killed nearly 300 American and French servicemen with two coordinated car and truck bombings targeted at the compounds housing these forces. These suicide attacks were the beginning of a new trend, namely the systematic use of suicide attacks as part of terrorist and/or insurgent campaigns. Until 1999, dozens of additional suicide attacks were conducted in Lebanon, most of which were carried out by Hizballah, which targeted mostly Israeli forces and its Lebanese allies.

Lebanon was the staging ground for many innovations in the history of suicide attacks, including the use of female suicide bombers and the systematic proliferation of a cult of sacrifice. On March 10, 1985, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party dispatched 18-year old Sumayah Sa’ad, who drove a car loaded with dynamite into an Israeli military position in Southern Lebanon, killing twelve Israeli soldiers and wounding fourteen others. No other female suicide bombers are known to have been used prior to that date. Two weeks later, 17-year old San’ah Muheidli drove a TNT-laden car into an IDF convoy, killing two soldiers and wounding
two more. The two women were posthumously awarded the title of ‘Brides of Blood’ (*Arous ad-Damm*).\(^{11}\)

No other organization was more proficient at deploying suicide bombers during the early 1980s than Hizballah. To justify the need to sacrifice its own fighters, the group developed a cult of martyrdom which it had copied from revolutionary Iran. Generating this cult had the added effect of raising the number of potential recruits for Hizballah, as well as creating a mechanism to morally disengage the group from the act and its victims. One of the ways in which this culture was propagated was through the use of euphemism. Thus, the group used the phrase *al-amalyiat al-istishhadiyya* (martyr operation) as a euphemism instead of the word *intihar*, which describes ordinary suicide on the basis of personal distress. Similarly, the martyr (*shahid*, lit. witness) was described as a ‘happy martyr’ (*shahid as-said*) or *istishhaadi*, i.e., he who gives himself over to martyrdom. Suicide attacks, along with the names of their perpetrators, were announced and celebrated on radio stations and, since 1990, television stations. In addition, as many Palestinian, Iraqi, and other suicide bombers would do in subsequent years, Lebanese ‘shahids’ recorded a farewell video, which was frequently broadcast alongside the footage of the attack itself. The group also established martyrs’ funds, while its spiritual and strategic supporters praised the martyrs’ deeds in mosques and other public institutions.\(^{12}\)

Suicide attacks were relatively successful in Lebanon in that they raised the costs of military presence for foreign states. They helped lead to the withdrawal of French and American troops from Lebanon, and likely contributed to Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon to a smaller, self-proclaimed ‘security zone,’ which it held until it fully withdrew from Lebanon in 2000.

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\(^{11}\) Taheri, *Holy Terror*, 126-129.

The success of the tactic in Lebanon soon prompted other groups to adopt suicide missions, among them the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), whose leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, was greatly impressed by Hizballah’s successful use of suicide attacks as a tool to fight an asymmetric battle.\textsuperscript{13} Beginning in July 1987, the LTTE’s charismatic leader decided to adopt suicide tactics in order to offset the militarily more powerful Sri Lankan state, which is dominated by ethnic Sinhalese. Between 1987 and 2001, the LTTE planned and executed an estimated 200 suicide attacks\textsuperscript{14}—a number that, until 2003, accounted for more suicide operations than those by all other organizations employing this tactic combined. In 2003, the LTTE was bypassed by Palestinian organizations as the lead perpetrators of this tactic.\textsuperscript{15}

The first Palestinian organization to adopt this tactic was Hamas, which carried out its first such mission at the Mehola Junction on April 16, 1993. Between 1993 and 1998, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) carried out nearly 30 suicide attacks. The tactic became even more widely used in the next wave of attacks that occurred during the Second Intifada. Henceforth, suicide attacks were also used by more secular organizations such as the Fatah’s Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

Suicide missions have also been used in the context of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict between 1996 and 1999, when the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) executed 15 suicide attacks and planned another seven attacks that failed.\textsuperscript{16} The PKK was led by a highly charismatic leader, Abdullah Ocalan, and its cadres included many women. The PKK’s attacks peaked in 1999,

\textsuperscript{13} Bruce Hoffman and Gordon H. McCormick, “Terrorism, Signaling, and Suicide Attack,” \textit{Studies in Conflict and Terrorism} 27, no. 4 (July-August 2004), 259.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 256. There are no precise data on the number of attacks perpetrated by the LTTE. For a discussion, see Hoffman and McCormick, “Terrorism, Signaling, and Suicide Attack,” 275, fn. 52. See also Stephen Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers, 1987-2002,” in \textit{Making Sense of Suicide Missions}, ed. Diego Gambetta (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 53-55.
\textsuperscript{15} Based on information gathered from the suicide terrorism database by the National Security Studies Center, University of Haifa. The author thanks Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger for providing me with access to the database.
\textsuperscript{16} Ami Pedahzur, \textit{Suicide Terrorism} (Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2005), 89.
following Ocalan’s capture in Kenya. They came to a halt when in August 1999, the PKK’s imprisoned leader announced a ‘peace initiative’ and denounced violence.

The first suicide bombing in Chechnya took place less than a year after the last suicide attack by the PKK. On June 7, 2000, a Chechen man and a Chechen woman detonated a bomb-laden truck at a checkpoint at Alkhan-Yurt in Chechnya. The attacks in Chechnya were different from other suicide attacks since the 1980s. From the very outset, the Chechen conflict bore elements of a global struggle. Rather than attempting to keep the focus on its Russian enemy, the Chechen rebels noted on their official website after their first suicide attack that the operation was meant as a message to all Muslims. The operation, according to the rebels, “was a cry that said no to the crimes against the Muslim Ummah, but will the people of the Ummah heed to this call and rush to support their brothers and sisters who are in need? Will the hearts of the believers come alive with this example of pure faith and courageous sacrifice?”17 These attacks in Chechnya, the emergence of suicide attacks by Al Qaeda in 1998, and the dramatic rise of suicide attacks in Iraq after 2003 are more properly understood in the context of Al Qaeda and its relationship with suicide attacks.

The Al Qaeda Phenomenon and Suicide Attacks in Iraq

On August 7, 1998, a set of explosions, only minutes apart, rocked the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. The bombings at the embassies were a milestone in the confrontation between Al Qaeda and the United States, as they marked the beginning of Al Qaeda’s involvement in the planning, direction, and execution of suicide attacks. The attacks also represented a fundamental shift in Al Qaeda’s strategy. Up to the mid-1990s, the terrorist

network had focused its ire on the ‘near enemy’—Arab and Muslim regimes whose real or perceived alliance with the United States rendered them apostates in the understanding of the group’s Salafi-Jihadist ideology. On August 7, 1998, it became painfully clear that Al Qaeda had completed a change in strategy that now involved punishing the ‘far enemy’—the infidel regimes in the West, led by the United States. The attacks foreshadowed future spectacular suicide attacks by Al Qaeda that would target the United States and its allies over the next decade. They included the attack on the USS Cole in October 2000; the attacks of September 11, 2001; an attack on a synagogue in Djerbia, Tunisia, in April 2002; and a series of suicide and other terrorist operations in Kenya in November 2002. The group was also involved in a number of other suicide bombings, including in Casablanca and Istanbul in May and November 2003, and in London in July 2005. Numerous other attempts were foiled, including an attempt by shoe bomber Richard Reid to detonate an explosive device over the Atlantic, a desire to hit U.S. landmarks in New York and New Jersey, and a plot to blow up as many as a dozen airliners bound from London to the United States over American cities in the summer or fall of 2006.

In Al Qaeda’s arsenal of tactics, suicide attacks assume a pivotal role. Like other groups, Al Qaeda has adopted this tactic because of its high lethality, its ability to instill fear in the target audience, and sow confusion among its enemy. More so than other groups, however, Al Qaeda has also been successful at instilling the spirit of self-sacrifice and the cult of martyrdom in the collective psyche of virtually all of its fighters.

Abdullah Azzam, co-founder of Al Qaeda, was the first theoretician who succeeded in turning martyrdom and self-sacrifice into a ‘formative ethos’ of Al Qaeda. The significance of self-sacrifice for the group is reflected in a document found in an Al Qaeda safe house in Afghanistan titled ‘Goals and Objectives of Jihad,’ which ranked the goal of “attaining

In word, if perhaps not in deed, the devotion to martyrdom extends to Al Qaeda’s leaders, as is evident from statements of its leadership, including bin Laden. In August 1998, the Al Qaeda head declared, “I am fighting so I can die a martyr and go to heaven to meet God. Our fight is now against America. I regret having lived this long. I have nothing to lose.” He reiterated this statement in December 1998, saying, “I am not afraid of death. Rather, martyrdom is my passion because martyrdom would lead to the birth of 1,000s of Osamas.”\footnote{Quoted in Bruce Hoffman, “Al Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism, and Future Potentialities: An Assessment,” \textit{Studies in Conflict and Terrorism} 26, no. 6 (November-December 2003), 436-37.}

Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda members inculcated this importance of martyrdom into the minds of the network’s rank and file. In 2004, for instance, bin Laden urged his followers to “become diligent in carrying out martyrdom operations; these operations, praise be to God, have become a great source of terror for the enemy … These are the most important operations.”\footnote{Quoted in Christopher M. Blanchard, “Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology,” in CRS Report for Congress RL32759 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2005), 10.} Similarly, bin Laden’s deputy, Ayman Zawahiri, regularly elevates martyrdom as the most honorable act for Muslims. A videotape in which Zawahiri applauded the martyrdom of London bombers Shehzad Tanweer and Mohammed Siddique Khan, demonstrated how the tribute of the bombers served in no small measure to inspire other potential jihadists:

In order to remove this injustice, Shehzad began training with all his might and devotion. Together with the martyr Siddiq Khan, he received practical and intensive training in how to produce and use explosives, in the camps of Qaeda Al-Jihad. The recruits who join these camps do not have to achieve high averages
or to pass entrance exams. All they need is to be zealous for their religion and nation, and to love Jihad and martyrdom for the sake of Allah.”

The preeminence of suicide attacks among Al Qaeda’s tactics has been most dramatically on display in Iraq after the U.S. led invasion in March 2003. On March 22, 2003, less than a week after the beginning of the Iraq campaign, four civilians, including Paul Moran, a 39-year old Australian cameraman on assignment for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, were killed in a suicide car bombing on the outskirts of the village of Khurmal in northern Iraq. Over the next years, the number of suicide attacks in Iraq would easily surpass that of all known suicide attacks in other countries combined.

High-profile suicide attacks in Iraq initially targeted mostly U.S. and allied forces, as well as international organizations. In subsequent years, these attacks began to target Iraqi ‘collaborators’ and members of Iraq’s Shia community, oftentimes during Shia high holidays.

The perpetrators of suicide attacks in Iraq are mostly foreigners who form a relatively small part of the Iraqi insurgency. Several researchers concluded that Saudis contributed the bulk of suicide bombers in Iraq. Other bombers come from other Arab countries such as Syria and Kuwait, but also from Europe. One of the most notorious suicide bombings by a foreigner took place in Baghdad on November 9, 2005, by Muriel Degauque—a Belgian woman who converted to Islam.

24 “Iraq Bomber was ‘Belgian Woman,’” BBC News, 30 November 2005.
As in a growing number of other regions—notably Afghanistan, Pakistan, Chechnya, but also Western Europe—suicide attacks in Iraq are increasingly associated with Salafi-Jihadist ideology. Most suicide attacks in Iraq are perpetrated by groups that adhere to a strict Salafi-Jihadist doctrine of Islam. These include Ansar al-Islam, Ansar al-Sunnah Army, the Victorious Sect, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jamaah Army, and the Conquest Army, among others.25

The quintessential Salafi-Jihadist group active in Iraq is Al Qaeda in Iraq, whose goals are paradigmatic for those of other Salafi-Jihadist organizations. They were summarized in an online magazine in March 2005 by a commander of the group, Abu Maysara. Al Qaeda in Iraq’s goals include the renewal of pure monotheism; waging jihad for the sake of Allah; coming to the aid of the Muslims wherever they are; reclaiming Muslim dignity; and finally, “to re-establish the Rightly-Guided Caliphate in accordance with the Prophet’s example, because ‘whoever dies without having sworn allegiance to a Muslim ruler dies as an unbeliever.’”26

Explanations of Suicide Attacks

In recent years, and especially after the attacks of September 11, 2001, there has been a steep increase in the number of studies dedicated to explaining the causes of suicide attacks. Some of these have focused on the level of the individual bomber, examining such personal motivations as humiliation, despair, personal crisis, commitment, or psychopathology.27 Others

25 Hafez, Suicide Bombers in Iraq.
26 The article was translated by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). See “The Iraqi Al-Qa’ida Organization: A Self-Portrait,” MEMRI Special Dispatch Series No. 884 (24 March 2005).
27 See, for example, Joan Lachkar, “The Psychological Make-up of a Suicide Bomber,” Journal of Psychohistory 29, no. 4 (Spring 2002); David Lester, Bijou Yang, and Mark Lindsay, “Suicide Bombers: Are Psychological Profiles Possible?,” Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 27, no. 4 (July-August 2004); Eyad Sarraj, “Suicide Bombers: Dignity, Despair, and the Need of Hope,” Journal of Palestine Studies 31, no. 4 (Summer 2004); and Anat Berko, The Path to Paradise: The Inner World of Suicide Bombers and their Dispatchers (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007).
have stressed the need to focus on the group or organization as the key variable of suicide bombings. A third category of studies has emphasized the socio-structural level, while a fourth group of scholars has argued that a proper understanding of suicide terrorism requires an approach that crosses multiple levels of analysis.

Studies focusing on the individual level of analysis have made important contributions to the understanding of why individuals may be motivated to sacrifice their lives for a larger cause, but they also left behind a fair number of question marks. Suicide terrorism analysts from a variety of disciplines have been able to reject a number of previously held beliefs. They have concluded that suicide bombers cannot be compared to ordinary suicides. While ordinary suicides are usually drawn to their deaths due to a personal crisis, suicide bombers tend to act for what they believe to be altruistic reasons—a distinction dating back to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Neither do suicide bombers act irrationally. On the contrary, most analysts believe that suicide attackers act rationally in the sense that they believe the benefits of perpetrating suicide attacks to outweigh the costs of doing so.

Terrorism scholars have also been able to dispel the often held belief that ‘all suicide bombers are alike.’ Thus, while a number of earlier studies of suicide attackers have argued that

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28 Ehud Sprinzak, “Rational Fanatics,” Foreign Policy, September/October 2000; Mia Bloom, Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Robert A. Pape, Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism (New York: Random House, 2005); Pedahzur, Suicide Terrorism.


31 Sprinzak, “Rational Fanatics;” Assaf Moghadam, “Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada: Motivations and Organizational Aspects,” Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 26, no. 2 (2003); Bloom, Dying to Kill; Pedahzur, Suicide Terrorism; Hoffman and McCormick, “Terrorism, Signaling, and Suicide Attack.”
there is a common profile to suicide bombers, more recent studies based on additional data have concluded that suicide attackers do not share many similar characteristics in common.

Many researchers have been occupied with the role that psychological factors play in the genesis of suicide bombers, but have failed to produce evidence that conclusively links psychopathology with the resort to terrorism. While clearly highly alienated from society, most experts agree, terrorists are sane and relatively ‘normal’ in the sense that they do not exhibit signs of suffering from a salient psychopathology. For that reason, mental illness as a factor in suicide terrorism has been dismissed.

Studies of individual bombers have highlighted that some suicide bombers have suffered from personal crisis which is likely to have played a role in the decision to become a suicide bomber. Personal crisis appears to be a particularly common motivation among women suicide bombers such as the Chechen Black Widows.

Studies have also been able to show that a prevailing motive on the individual level for the resort to suicide attacks is the seeking of revenge—at times reinforced by perceived humiliation. Kimhi and Even, for instance, identified the individual seeking retribution for suffering as one of four prototypes of Palestinian suicide bombers.

Sometimes, according to some researchers, suicide attackers act out of a deep sense of commitment to a larger cause, their social network, or the terrorist organization and its ideology.\textsuperscript{38} According to Pedahzur, this sense of commitment applies particularly to those suicide bombers who have been members of organizations, as opposed to those that have been recruited for the particular task of a suicide mission.\textsuperscript{39} Strong commitment can be the result of psychological pressure exerted by the group’s leadership, which can help present suicide attacks as a way for an ordinary individual to defend his country and his people. Suicide bombings can be highly empowering in that regard. Hafez, for example, argues that militant groups call upon suicide bombers to “perform their duty to their own values, family, friends, community, or religion. Failure to act, consequently, creates dissonance because it is perceived as a betrayal of one’s ideals, loved ones, country, God, or sense of manhood.”\textsuperscript{40} Suicide attacks may thus be conceived as a way for individuals to overcome and reverse their perceived sense of humiliation, shame, and injustice to achieve honor, respect, and redemption.\textsuperscript{41}

Several authors have stressed the expectation of posthumous benefits as a motive for suicide attackers particularly when the perpetrators of the attacks are Muslims. Such benefits can include the suicide attacker’s elevated social status after death, rewards for the family, as well as the attainment of heavenly pleasures in the afterlife. The expectation of personal benefits in the

\textsuperscript{38} See, for example, Kimhi and Even, “Who are the Palestinian Suicide Bombers?;” Pedahzur, \textit{Suicide Terrorism}, 126-34.
\textsuperscript{39} Pedahzur, \textit{Suicide Terrorism}, 125.

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afterlife that seems to motivate many Muslim suicide bombers, such as a guaranteed place in heaven, the eventual reunification with one’s family, or sexual pleasures, does not necessarily apply to non-religious cases of suicide attacks. In the case of the nationalist Black Tigers, for example, there is no expectation of a posthumous compensation.

Finally, some students of suicide attacks have argued that suicide bombers may act partly out of financial incentives, which have already been shown to have affected some non-suicidal terrorists in their decision to join or remain in terrorist organizations. Monetary rewards for the families of suicide bombers have been common among Palestinian suicide bombers as well as those of Hizballah.

In sum, studies examining individual motivations of suicide terrorism have established that suicide bombers can be motivated by a range of motivations that often includes a strong commitment and the seeking of revenge, and sometimes a sense of personal crisis. These studies, however, have not been able to identify either necessary or sufficient conditions for an individual’s resort to suicide terrorism. Thus, no studies have established why some highly committed individuals become suicide bombers while others do not, or why revenge leads to suicide terrorism in some cases and not in others.

Partly in response to these limitations, a second category of studies have focused on the organizational-strategic level of analysis. Studies falling within this approach are particularly

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42 For a discussion of these benefits in the case of Palestinian suicide bombers, see Boaz Ganor, “Suicide Attacks in Israel,” in Countering Suicide Terrorism, ed. International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) (Herzliyya, Israel: ICT, 2001), 144-45.
44 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, for example, argues that suicide bombers are “young men with no economic prospects and little education. There is a rational expectation on the part of suicide bombers that they are providing for their families.” Quoted in Bloom, Dying to Kill, 35.
45 See especially Stern, Terror in the Name of God, 189, 216.
important because suicide attacks are mostly acts of terrorism, which in turn are rarely carried out by individuals acting on their own, but by individuals who are members of organizations, groups, or cells attached to a larger network.\textsuperscript{47}

Studies falling into this category build on the pioneering theoretical work of Crenshaw, who argued that terrorism can be understood as the result of a deliberate choice by terrorist organizations who believe that violence is the best means to advance their political goals.\textsuperscript{48}

Suicide attacks perpetrated by terrorist organizations may thus be the result of the organization’s perceived need to survive.\textsuperscript{49} A minimum degree of violent presence is necessary for all terrorist groups to remain effective. Failure to maintain such a degree of violence will eventually lead—or will be perceived to lead—to the group’s irrelevance and eventual disappearance as a political force. The timing of the suicide attack may be a function of opportunity. The organization may possess a rare opportunity to stage a successful suicide attack or it may have a unique opportunity to strike a target of particularly high value, deciding to use a suicide operation to increase the chances of success, as the Narodnaya Volya did in the previously mentioned assassination of Tsar Alexander II on March 1, 1881.

Researchers examining suicide terrorism from an organizational perspective emphasize the strategic and tactical benefits of this mode of operations. Several authors have argued that their relatively high degree of lethality has rendered suicide attacks a rational or ‘logical’ choice.

\textsuperscript{47} Very few exceptions of individuals acting entirely on their own exist, including the ‘Unabomber,’ Theodore Kaczynski, as well as 15-year-old Charles Bishop, who crashed a light plane into the 28th floor of the Bank of America Plaza in Tampa, Florida, on 5 January 2002.


for organizations and states under certain circumstances. Pape, for example, asserts that “the main reason that suicide terrorism is growing is that terrorists have learned that it works.” Other scholars, however, have challenged that contention by arguing that the degree of success of suicide terrorism is overstated.

In any event, suicide attacks are hardly employed for military purposes alone. More likely, organizations utilize this tactic for a combination of military effectiveness and political purpose. The frequent videotaping of suicide bombers prior to their mission underscores the fact that terrorist organizations attempt to elicit maximum propaganda benefits. Similarly, suicide bombings are often timed to derail political events inimical to the cause of the terrorist group—be it the Israeli-Palestinian peace process or elections in Iraq.

Several authors, most notably among them Pape, place the blame of suicide attacks mainly on foreign occupation—a point that has been contested by others. At the least, it is clear that not all societies under occupation have produced suicide bombers, and not all suicide bombers have grown up in destitution. Similarly, governmental repression gives rise to suicide terrorism in some cases—repression exists, in varying degrees, in Russia, Sri Lanka, and Israel—but does not have the same effect in Latin America and Africa, where suicide attacks have

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51 Pape, Dying to Win, 61.
54 Pape, Dying to Win, 23.
remained a rarity despite the many examples of brutal authoritarian and dictatorial regimes found on these continents.

An additional reason why some groups prefer suicide attacks is for their tactical benefits, which are numerous. First, even more than ordinary terrorist attacks, suicide operations are likely to draw attention to a group’s cause, aided in large part by the extraordinarily high attention such operations enjoy in the media. In this regard, suicide attacks can be thought of as a form of ‘strategic signaling,’ whereby terrorist attacks are used to communicate a group’s character and goals to the target audience.57 As pointed out by Hoffman and McCormick, for instance, the LTTE used suicide attacks to signal an image of elitism, professionalism, invincibility, and fanatical single-mindedness to the Sri Lankan government.58

Second, suicide missions, even more than ordinary terrorist attacks, serve the organization’s attempt to create extreme fear in the larger population—a key feature, in fact, of all terrorist attacks. This occurs in part due to the group’s demonstration of the inefficacy of the targeted government, and in part due to the demoralization of the public and of law enforcement agencies. A suicide attack creates not only a disproportionately intense amount of fear among the targeted population, but its effect may be particularly traumatizing and long-lasting,59 thus serving, as Holmes put it, as an “intensifier of enemy despair.”60 Adding to the frustration of the targeted population, Holmes adds, is the inability of the targeted community to exact revenge on

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57 Hoffman and McCormick, “Terrorism, Signaling, and Suicide Attack,” 262.
58 Ibid.
the perpetrators, arguably rendering the recovery from these attacks more difficult than from ordinary terrorism.\textsuperscript{61}

Third, suicide attacks may serve as an internal moral-booster for the terrorist group. The use of this tactic indicates the complete dedication of the suicide attackers to their cause. It can lead to a sense of moral superiority of the groups’ members over their adversaries, which may result in a group’s perception that it will eventually prevail over its enemies.\textsuperscript{62}

Finally, terrorist organizations adopt suicide operations because of a number of unique operational benefits. They are a cost-efficient tool, with suicide vests costing as little as $50-$150.\textsuperscript{63} They are also high-precision weapons of sorts, and have therefore often been called the “ultimate smart bomb.”\textsuperscript{64} The explosive devices, which are usually strapped on to the perpetrator’s body, can be detonated at the time and place of the attacker’s choosing, thus maximizing the lethality of the improvised explosive device (IED). Other tactical benefits of suicide attacks are that their use obviates the need for the complicated task of planning an escape route. Furthermore, the suicide bomber’s ensured death nullifies the risk of his or her capture. The risk that the bomber will be intercepted, interrogated, and compelled to disclose incriminating information about the organization is minuscule.\textsuperscript{65}

In sum, organizational approaches to suicide bombing have highlighted the strategic and tactical benefits of suicide attacks. The reasons why groups adopt suicide attacks have little to do with the motivations that lead individuals to become suicide bombers. Similar to the individual level studies, however, organizational approaches have limitations. They fail to explain why, if

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{63} Hassan, “An Arsenal of Believers,” 36-41.
\textsuperscript{64} See, for example, Bruce Hoffman, “The Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, June 2003, 40-47.
the tactics of suicide terrorism are so numerous, not all organizations use suicide attacks. Neither do they provide a satisfying answer to the question of when a terrorist group decides to adopt a suicide attack.

Socio-cultural approaches, the third major category of studies of suicide attacks, have attempted to provide an answer to the limits of the individual and organizational approaches by arguing that individuals and organizations will embark on suicide terrorism if they enjoy social support for this tactic. Indeed, this explanation appears to account for the widespread use of suicide attacks in places like Lebanon or Israel, where a cult of martyrdom has been apparent—manifesting itself in venerations of suicide bombers, the prominent use of euphemistic labels for suicide attacks and their perpetrators, and the penetration of the suicide bomber into popular culture, such as movies, comics, or plays.

Some researchers claim that sustained levels of suicide terrorism are entirely dependent upon strong support among the attacker’s domestic population. It is apparent, however, that an increasing number of suicide attacks in recent years have been performed in countries where there does not seem to be strong popular support for these activities—such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and even Iraq. A culture of martyrdom may well surround the world of the suicide bombers in these cases, but increasingly that culture seems to be found on cyberspace, as opposed to the street.

In recent years, more prominent approaches to the study of suicide terrorism have attempted to integrate these varying approaches into models integrating several levels of analysis. The proponents of multi-causal approaches correctly note that mono-causal approaches to the study of suicide attacks are insufficient, and that a comprehensive understanding of suicide terrorism

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66 Bloom, *Dying to Kill*.
terrorism requires an understanding of individual level motives, organizational level strategic and tactical factors, as well as the role played by the external environment. Scholars adopting such approaches, however, have not been able to solve the problem of specificity, i.e., explaining why some situations produce suicide terrorism while others do not.\textsuperscript{68}

\textit{Towards New Explanations of Suicide Attacks}

In recent years, the tactic of suicide terrorism appears to have undergone some changes that necessitate a thorough review of existing explanations of suicide terrorism. Take the argument that suicide terrorism is a response to foreign occupation—an argument that appears to have some merit, given the apparently widespread use of suicide terrorism among communities vying for a national homeland, such as Palestinians and Tamils. Upon closer inspection, however, suicide attacks increasingly occur in places where there is no discernible occupation. Bangladesh, Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and Uzbekistan, are some of the countries that suffered such attacks in recent years that are not occupied by foreign armies. Second, in those countries where there is an occupation, attacks are not always directed at occupiers but at other ethnic communities, as is the case in Iraq, where Shias are among the prime targets. In addition, those attacks that are aimed at military targets linked to occupation are not always carried by the occupied. In Iraq, most attacks that do target occupation forces are carried out not by Iraqis, but instead by Saudi, Syrian, Kuwaiti, North African, and other foreign jihadists.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{68} Moghadam, “Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada;” Moghadam, “The Roots of Suicide Terrorism;” Hafez, “Rationality, Culture, and Structure in the Making of Suicide Bombers.”

Another prominent theory that appears to lose its explanatory power are organizational explanations suggesting that groups adopt suicide terrorism in order to better compete with other groups for the support of a local population. The theory assumes that the local population supports suicide bombings, yet in a growing number of places such strong domestic support appears to be lacking. An openly propagated cult of martyrdom, so visible in Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza, is not visible in places like Iraq and Afghanistan—regions that dominate the landscape of suicide terrorism in terms of numbers of attacks.

Explanations of suicide terrorism that will be offered in the future must account for several fundamental changes noticeable in the pattern of suicide attacks. They must account for the fact that while suicide attacks in the past were perpetrated mostly by subnational organizations with limited goals, they are now increasingly perpetrated by Salafi-Jihadist organizations with transnational goals. They must also account for the fact that suicide attacks during the 1980s and much of the 1990s were mostly localized affairs, involving attacks that were locally planned and locally executed, with the help of local handlers, recruiters, and suicide bombers. Today’s suicide attacks tend to have goals that are more global, and indeed unlimited in scope. Salafi-Jihadists have become the predominant ideological perpetrators of suicide terrorism, and their world view is based on an exceedingly loose definition of the enemy. Whereas traditional suicide bombers such as Lebanese members of Hizballah or members of Palestinian groups had a clear and limited notion of who they should target—namely the American, French, or Israeli occupiers—many suicide bombers today have adopted the rhetoric

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of Al Qaeda and its guiding Salafi-Jihadist ideology, which present the enemy in broad terms, as an infidel or a member of the ‘Zionist-Crusader alliance.’

Future explanations of suicide attacks must also explain why today’s recruitment occurs increasingly from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. Whereas groups such as Hamas or the LTTE once sent out recruiters to identify suicide bombers, many suicide bombers today volunteer for ‘martyrdom operations’ proactively, instead of waiting to be contacted by recruitment officers. These explanations must also address the worrisome fact that a growing number of suicide bombers have not undergone the same kinds of experiences that have arguably contributed to the willingness to become suicide bombers in earlier cases. Increasingly, grievances of present day bombers are vicariously, rather than directly, experienced. Mohammed Sidique Khan, Hasib Mir Hussein, Shahzeed Tanweer, and Germaine Lindsay—the four London suicide bombers—have not experienced the hardships of military occupation that their suicidal counterparts in the West Bank and Gaza have endured. Neither is it likely that the large numbers of Saudis and other foreign jihadists who flock to Iraq to become martyrs have themselves experienced the humiliation of roadblocks or other manifestations of foreign occupation. On the contrary, many of today’s martyrs, in fact, have enjoyed a relatively comfortable upbringing.72

Finally, forthcoming explanations of suicide attacks will be more valuable if they can help address the growing trend of radicalization in small cells. What role do preexisting social ties such as friendship or kinship play in the radicalization of individuals towards suicide terrorism, and are networks a necessary and/or sufficient factor? These and other vexing questions revolving around suicide attacks are not likely to be answered conclusively any time soon, but additional insights into these phenomena may help contain the scourge of suicide.

72 See, for example, Reuven Paz, “Arab Volunteers in Iraq: An Analysis,” PRISM Occasional Papers Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 2005); and Marc Sageman, Understanding Terror Networks.
terrorism in the future.

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